



Can't Help Falling in Love With You by Phantasmoplast

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Summary: The gate has been closed, Will has been cured, and the girl who has been haunting Mike's dreams for a year is back. Everything is back to normal. Everything is perfect. There's just one burr: Mike and Eleven are madly in love and it's obvious to everyone except each other. Takes place before the 1 month later epilogue in Season 2.

1. Chapter 1

Michael Wheeler had, just a few hours earlier, risked his own life in an effort to draw a raging horde of fanged, clawed, flower-faced trans-dimensional demon dogs into an underground tunnel system with him by setting the whole network ablaze. It had, of course, been terrifying as fuck.

He didn't think it came remotely close to the nervousness he was feeling now. He was sitting in the backseat of Steve's car, with Lucas and Max at his side. Dustin rode up front with Steve himself (in a bizarre twist of fate that Mike tried and failed to understand, the two seemed to have spontaneously developed a strong, almost brotherly bond). Nobody was saying a word, which was perfectly fine with Mike. He doubted he'd be able to talk if he tried.

Three hundred and fifty three days.

And fifteen hours, twenty-seven minutes and approximately thirty-one seconds, assuming the count begins at seven a.m. the day after she disappeared, a little voice in the back of Mike's head chipped in helpfully. He ignored it.

Three hundred and fifty three days. And now he was going to see her.

Of course he had seen her earlier that night, but that had been different. For sure, he had felt about as joyful as he could ever remember feeling when he saw her walk through the Beyers' front door, hair (*she had hair now!*) slicked back, eyes dark with liner and looking, in Mike's opinion, like a million bucks. But then, they had had a task to focus on. The gate needed to be closed. The joy of their reunion had been dampened with that knowledge, and the realization that one or both of them was likely to die in the events that followed. They barely had a chance to exchange greetings and a long, long hug before they were split apart again.

But it was over now. Minutes of tense silence had passed after he, Dustin, Lucas, Max and Steve had climbed up out of the tunnels, none of them uttering a sound. Then Mike's Supercom had crackled, and he had grabbed at it frantically, hands trembling with equal parts hope

and fear.

"This is the chief. Does anybody copy? Over," came Hopper's gravelly, distorted voice.

"Yeah — chief, it's Mike. We copy. We're all okay. Over," Mike had replied, heart pounding so hard he thought it might explode out of his chest. The others eagerly clustered around to hear Hopper's response.

"She did it. Gate's closed. Looks like all the dog things went with it. Eleven's passed out but she's alive. I'm taking her back to my place. Over and out," came the reply, and the line went dead.

A cheer went up from the kids. Lucas, Dustin, and Max exchanged a wild three-way hug, with a protesting Steve roped in by one of Dustin's burly arms ("Ow — Jesus, watch it, punk, I'm bruised as shit, if you haven't noticed!"). Mike felt like a huge blast of oxygen had been shot into his chest with a cannon; he realized he hadn't been breathing and took in several great lungfuls of air.

Eleven's passed out but she's alive, he repeated to himself, and felt a huge shameless grin spreading out over his face. *She's okay and she's with the chief and I'm going to see her with no stupid monster in the way.*

They had driven back to the Byer house, throwing up the door to greet a very tired and ill-looking Will and give Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy the good news. Mike, after ensuring Will was indeed alive, began to pace incessantly, thinking about Eleven. Now that the initial shock of relief had passed, jumbled nerves and paranoia came in its place. Would she be okay? What if closing the portal turned out to be too much after all, and she slipped into a coma or something? Would Hopper know what to do?

And what if, Mike chewed his lip nervously. *What if she doesn't like me?* As soon as he thought it he tossed his head angrily, shaking away the intrusive thoughts as a bull might shake off flies. *Stupid*, he chastised himself. *That's not what you should be worrying about right now. Be grateful she's back. And that she's alive.*

Suddenly his Supercom crackled again. Once more, Hopper's gruff

voice came out.

"Alright," he said. "The kid woke up and she won't shut up about seeing all of you. You can drive on over if you want. Over."

Mike almost dropped the walkie-talkie in his haste to reply. "We'll be right there!" he promised. "Over and out."

Now, they were driving up the narrow road leading to Hopper's cabin. The little wooden house became visible through the trees. Mike had the door open and was running for the entrance before Steve had even stopped the car ("Hey, you little shit, don't get yourself killed now *after* all the monster crap!"). With Dustin, Lucas and Max at his heels, he barged through the unlocked front door and found himself facing the tall, beige-clad form of the chief, who had to grab Mike by the shoulders to prevent the excited teenager from colliding with him.

"Woah, easy, kid," Hopper warned. "Now, she's drained as hell and frankly I wouldn't have let you kids come if there was another way to stop her from nagging my ear off. So don't get her excited, huh? You can talk for a few minutes but I want you all out of here as soon as you've said your hellos. She needs rest. So keep it calm, keep it quick and keep it quiet." He looked from kid to kid. "Am I clear?"

The four teens nodded solemnly. Dustin snapped a comically rigid salute that clearly did little to amuse Hopper. After giving him a stoic glance, the chief nodded slightly, extending an arm to indicate Eleven's room. They surged forward, Mike walking just a little faster than the others, and opened the door.

Eleven's prone, black-clad form lay on a bed in the corner of the room. Mike walked toward her, not really feeling his legs, as her eyes turned toward him. They locked on his, and Mike felt his heart swell so suddenly and so powerfully that he almost gasped out loud. His final step toward the bed seemed to take a million years, his feet moving as though trapped in amber like one of those mosquitoes you would see at a museum. Her eyes were dark, dark pools.

Mike had to blink to make sure she was really there. She wasn't a mirage, she wasn't a dream like the countless ones he'd had in the

past three hundred and fifty-three days. In them she would seem so real, so beautiful, so *there*, and she would talk to him and tell him she was back, that friends don't lie and she said she would come back so here she was, until he would touch her and she would vanish, dissolving into smoke before his eyes.

He completed the eternity-long step. One of her small, pale hands reached up toward him weakly. He took it in his own. It was warm. She didn't dissolve into smoke.

"El," Mike heard himself say, and suddenly he was leaning down over the bed and she was in his arms and he was in hers, and he felt tears coursing down his cheeks for the second time that evening.

"Mike," she whispered, voice muffled against his hair. He tried to respond but his voice wouldn't work. He had already told her that he had never given up on her, that he called every day for three hundred and fifty three days, hoping against hope for a response. He had so much more to say, but right now, he wasn't sure if he could get it out.

After either a decade or a second — Mike couldn't tell which — they broke apart, and Mike stepped back, suddenly very aware of the presence of his friends. "Uh," he stammered, wiping his face in a way that he hoped was surreptitious (it wasn't). "I — I'm really glad you're okay."

She gave him that small smile he remembered so well - lips closed, little dimples appearing in her cheeks. It was a breathtakingly, heartbreakingly beautiful smile.

Dustin and Lucas surged forward to replace him.

"Good job, dude," Lucas said bracingly, leaning over to give her a tight hug. Her smile broadened a little and one hand reached up to squeeze Lucas's shoulder. It was a very Hopper gesture.

"Hell of a good job," Dustin agreed, grinning widely. His voice rose in excitement. "Man, you should've seen those demo-dogs, they just *ran* right past me and Steve and I thought—"

"Hey!" Hopper shouted warningly from across the cabin. "What'd I say

about volume?"

"Sorry!" Dustin apologized. Then, more quietly: "Hypocrite." Mike, Lucas and Max sniggered. El didn't know a hypocrite was, but seeing her friends laugh made her laugh, too.

Max, seeing El's smile, felt emboldened enough to take a deep breath and step up alongside Lucas. "Hey, El," she greeted. "I, uh, introduced myself before. But, um..." She was suddenly unsure what to say. The introduction earlier in the evening had consisted of a very pissed-looking El shouldering past her without a word. "I just wanted to say good job, and, uh, thanks," Max finished lamely, and chewed her lip nervously.

Eleven's smile disappeared. She observed the red-haired girl through narrowed eyes, remaining dead silent. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin exchanged nervous glances, sensing the tension but not understanding it. After a couple seconds, Dustin, ever the diplomat, spoke up.

"So, El, what happened? What was the gate like?" he asked, grinning at her.

"Yeah, and did the Mind Flayer try to stop you from closing it?" Lucas added eagerly.

El bit her lip. "It was... dark. Cold. Red." She looked at Lucas. "He did try."

The group gasped and leaned forward as one. "How did you beat him?" Dustin asked in a hushed tone.

El shrugged. "I got angry. Thought about..." She glanced at Max. "Bad things."

"And it made you stronger than him?" Mike said. He chewed his lip, eyebrows contracting thoughtfully. El watched him, tired eyes suddenly alight with adoration. There was something about the way he would stare at nothing in particular and just *think* so visibly, gears grinding in his head for all the world to see, that made her feel warm inside. It was one of the things — one of the many things — she

hadn't even realized she missed about him.

Lucas noticed her mushy expression and rolled his eyes.

"Like the Hulk," Dustin exclaimed in response to El's earlier statement. It was Max's turn to roll her eyes. Dustin didn't notice. "Man, that's so sick," he said. "You're like a bunch of superheroes all rolled into one."

El smiled tiredly. Mike suddenly noticed how drained she looked. There were dark circles under her bloodshot eyes, and her skin was pale and clammy. She had faint red smears running from her nose to her upper lip, and her ears down the side of her neck. Her eyeshadow (where the hell had she gotten *eyeshadow* from?) was smudged and runny. Her eyes themselves were heavily lidded, repeatedly drooping closed and then fluttering open again as the girl fought to stay awake even through the conversation. Mike cleared his throat.

"El, do you want us to leave you alone so you can get some sleep?" he asked. The last thing he wanted was to leave, of course, but her comfort and health were more important.

In response, she yawned hugely. Mike noticed her teeth, imperfect and a little crooked. They were very cute teeth, as teeth went.

"Don't want you to leave," she murmured. She yawned again. "Tired, though."

On cue, Hopper stuck his head through the door. "Actually, Wheeler's right. She needs rest. And you kids could probably do with some, too."

"Ah, come on, we just got here," Dustin protested. Hopper raised an eyebrow and Lucas rammed an elbow into Dustin's ribs. "I mean, yeah, we probably could," he added hastily, rubbing his side and throwing Lucas a reproachful glance.

The four teenagers rose from their crouching positions. El followed them with her eyes as Lucas, Dustin, and Max turned to leave. Mike hesitated, staying by the bed. He glanced between El and the others.

"Mike, come on—" Lucas began, but Dustin stepped on his foot.

"Ouch! What the—"

Dustin jerked his head at Mike and El meaningfully.

"Oh," Lucas said, catching on. "Yeah, okay. Right." He exchanged a glance with Max, who shrugged. "Meet you outside, Mike."

"I'll be out in a second," said Mike. The three left, leaving him and El alone. For a long moment there was silence as the two stared at each other, greedily absorbing the other's presence.

"I'm really glad you're home," he said finally, quietly.

"Me too," El said, equally quietly. She reached out and took his hand. It was so much larger than hers, she realized. Mike had grown in the past three hundred and fifty-three days.

"I'll come right over tomorrow," Mike promised. "As soon I'm out of school. I'll bring Dustin and Lucas and Max and we'll do something fun, okay?"

El frowned momentarily at the mention of Max's name. She didn't like to hear it coming out of Mike's mouth. But the excitement of seeing him tomorrow — and Lucas and Dustin, of course — was far more prominent, and the frown quickly turned into a smile. "Okay, Mike," she said.

He stood. "See you tomorrow, then?"

El nodded. "Three one five?" she asked.

She remembers, Mike thought. She remembers what time I get out of school. "Yeah, three one five," he told her. "Promise."

She smiled. Mike opened his mouth to say something more, then closed it, then opened it again.

"El, I..." He trailed off.

"Yes?" she prompted.

I think you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and oh God I missed

you so much but now you're back and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

"Nothing," he said. "I—I missed you a lot." There was something different about his voice when he said it, something low and quiet that somehow sounded sorrowful and joyous at the same time. He looked at the floor, turning a light shade of pink.

"I missed you, too," she told him, and he smiled.

Eleven had his smile fixed in her mind when, minutes later, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. It was the first dreamless sleep she had had in three hundred and fifty three days.

2. Chapter 2

Thanks to all those who left kind comments! It means a lot to me. Enjoy chapter 2!

The following school day passed excruciatingly slowly. From the moment Mike entered his first period class (Earth Science, a class he usually enjoyed), he was impatiently checking his watch every few minutes. Time seemed to have slowed to an agonizing crawl; each minute passed felt closer to ten. Every word that came from Mr. Clarke's mouth passed right through him, unprocessed and unheard. It was maddening.

Eventually that eternity-spanning class had ended, and, walking in a dreamlike state, Mike had made his way to his next period, English. It passed, if possible, even more slowly.

The process repeated for third period, then fourth. Somehow he survived until lunch, but Mike was too excited and nervous to eat. He met Lucas, Dustin, and Max (Will was, understandably, not yet fit to return to school) in the AV room, but while they laughed, joked, and argued, Mike allowed himself to get lost in his own daydreams.

In his mind's eye, he was slowly approaching the door to Hopper's cabin. He knocked on the door, the sequence dull sharp thuds amplified in the silence of the daydream. The door opened and Eleven was there, washed and rested and dressed. She said his name softly and stepped toward him, small delicate hands reaching for him, grasping him by the back of the neck and pulling him close and her eyes were closed and—

"Mike?"

He started, looking around. Lucas was waving a beckoning hand at him.

"Yeah?"

"It's twelve twenty-five. We gotta go," Lucas said, and followed Max

and Dustin out of the AV room. Mike snatched up his bag. He suddenly realized he had forgotten to eat lunch.

Whatever, he thought, and hurried after Lucas.

The second half of the school day was just as tortuous as the first. Each period was just as grueling, and Mike was equally unable to focus. Some of his teachers became quickly irritated with his inability to pay attention.

"Mr. Wheeler!" the sharp-chinned and unfortunately named Mr. Ducock had snapped in American History.

"Yes — sorry!" Mike had replied guiltily, snapping out of his daydreams and dragging his blank gaze away from the window.

"Whatever is outside that window must be extraordinarily interesting," Mr. Ducock had commented dryly.

"Yes. I mean, no," Mike had stammered. "Sorry."

"We're on page two hundred and nine. You appear to be twelve pages behind," Mr. Ducock pointed out. Mike rushed to turn to the right page, cheeks burning. Mr. Ducock had nodded, satisfied.

"Thank you. Now, as I was saying, Benjamin Franklin's almost cultish admiration of the French led him to..."

Once American History was over, Mike went to his final class, math. After a decade-spanning forty-five minutes, the bell rang, sudden and jarring. Mike leapt to his feet so fast that his chair rocked back onto its hind legs, barely avoiding tipping over. He shoved his papers into his backpack, threw it over his shoulder, and ran out the door, not even bothering to put on his coat. Several alarmed stares followed him out of the room.

Mike bolted down the stairs and threw open the school's front doors, escaping the stuffy confines of the hall into crisp November air and clear watery sunlight. He ran to the bike rack and tugged his bike free, then looked around. None of his friends were here yet. Mike huffed impatiently and started to pace around the rack with his bike.

It took several minutes for anyone else to show up. When they did, they came as a trio; Max, Lucas and Dustin strolled out the doors, laughing at some joke or other. Dustin raised a hand in greeting. Mike stamped his feet urgently.

"Hurry up, hurry up," he called.

"Hurrying up, hurrying up," Dustin shouted back, increasing his pace. "Jeez, don't burn yourself out. She's not going anywhere, you know."

Mike didn't reply, just mounted his bike and waited for his friends to do the same. As soon as they did (except for Max, who rode her trusty skateboard), he was off, pedaling hard down the dusty hill. The others hurried to follow him.

"Christ," Max muttered to Lucas, who had slowed down marginally to keep pace with her. "He's really in love with her, isn't he?"

Lucas shook his head. "You have no idea."

Max smiled. It was relieving to finally have an explanation of Mike's dismissive and unfriendly behavior toward her since she befriended the boys. She had puzzled over the matter for days. Lucas and Dustin had kept insisting that he'd come around, and that he didn't usually act like this. She had started to doubt them. But this was the answer she had been looking for. Mike wasn't a dick after all.

He was just lovesick.

And unless she was very mistaken, Max was pretty sure she had just figured out why El didn't seem fond of her, either.

Nerds, Max thought, and kicked off harder to catch up to Lucas.

Mike leapt from his bike before it had even fully stopped. He landed awkwardly, stumbling, and was immediately running toward the door to Hopper's long, low-roofed cabin. He heard Dustin, breathing hard, pull up behind him, and Lucas and Max a few seconds later. He didn't wait for them.

He sprinted up the wooden steps, stopped in front of the door, and

knocked several times, harder than he had intended. Lucas, Max, and Dustin ran up the steps behind him.

"Eleven, it's us!" Mike called, his eagerness palpable to the three teenagers standing behind him.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, from inside the house, Mike heard a series of running footsteps on wooden floorboards. A second later the door flew open and, before he had a chance to even open his mouth, a slender, curly-haired figure cannoned into him, making him stumble back into Dustin.

"Woah—!" Dustin cried in alarm, windmilling his arms to catch his balance and colliding with Max and Lucas.

"Shit!" Lucas had time to gasp before Dustin's weight sent him flying backwards, down the wooden steps. Max let out a startled shriek of surprise, losing her balance and following Lucas down the stairs. She landed on top of him, causing him to release an explosive *WHOOF* as the air was crushed from his lungs. A heartbeat later, Dustin landed on top of them with shout of alarm, and Max shrieked again. Lucas tried, but no sound would come out. Dustin opened his mouth to apologize when something extremely heavy slammed into him from above, turning his words into a breathless grunt. Mike, with El in his arms, had been unable to retain his balance, and the two had careened down the rickety wooden stairs to land on top of Lucas, Max, and Dustin.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Lucas, opening and closing his mouth like a fish, managed to wriggle free and collapse onto his back, heaving in desperate, droning gasps of air. His movement unbalanced the whole pile, and the remaining four teenagers tumbled free. For several seconds, they were too breathless to speak. Then:

"Jesus Christ, not even five seconds with you and we're already almost dead again," Dustin commented, staring at the sky.

Several more seconds passed in silence. Then Dustin started to laugh, and the others followed suit (though Lucas's was littered with coughs). They lay on their backs on the dry leafy ground, laughing

and laughing until tears began to stream down their faces. It was another minute before they were finally able to compose themselves.

"I'm sorry," Eleven said guiltily, lifting her head. "I didn't mean to."

"That's okay," Dustin said, heaving himself onto his feet and brushing off his clothes.

"Speak for yourself," Lucas groaned, wincing. "I think I just broke every bone in my body."

"You did?" El said, alarmed.

Lucas waved his hands and shook his head. "Nah, not actually. I think I'm good." He massaged his bruised chest and accepted Max's helping hand, pulling himself to his feet. He looked down at Mike, who was still sprawled on the ground, halfway underneath El. He seemed to realize this suddenly; his face reddened and he quickly extracted himself from her, standing up and rubbing the back of his head.

"Uh... hi, El," he stammered. He was reeling a little. She had been extraordinarily soft against his chest. And her hair had smelled like vanilla. *And* it was curly, now that the gel had been washed out. Who knew she would have curly hair? It almost looked like Dustin's. Only Eleven's was a hell of a lot prettier, in Mike's opinion.

"Hi, Mike," she said, levering herself up to a sitting position. Mimicking Max, Mike extended a hand down to her. El blinked and took it, struggling to her feet. She held on for a few seconds longer than necessary before letting go.

"Let's go inside, guys," Dustin suggested. He shivered. "It's getting cold out here."

"Yeah, well, you should've been on the bottom of the meat-pile," Lucas grumbled, but he followed Dustin inside anyway.

As soon as the door shut behind Mike, the boys and Max dispersed to explore the house. Mike looked around curiously, standing next to El. He hadn't given the cabin much of an appraisal when he and his friends came to see El the previous night; he had, after all, had more pressing concerns. Upon examining it now, however, he found he was

surprised. It was unexpectedly warm and homely. The walls were aged and unpainted wood. Many objects that seemed like antiques or hand-me-downs — an old fluffy red carpet, a big rusty clock, china plates — lined the house. A fire crackled merrily in a broad stone fireplace.

"Hey, El?" he said suddenly, a question springing into his mind. "Hopper knows we're here, right?"

She nodded. "He says he'll..." She frowned, biting her lip. "Tol... toler..."

"Tolerate?" Mike suggested gently.

She nodded gratefully. "He says he'll tolerate it if we promise not to go outside."

"Suits me," Dustin called, looking over from his examination of a stuffed trout mounted on the far wall. "Too cold out there."

"Pussy," jibed Max. Dustin mimed wiping tears from his eyes. She sniggered.

El seemed to realize the red-headed girl was present for the first time. She looked at her, happy expression suddenly dissolving into a suspicious frown. Mike noticed.

"What's up?" he asked her, keeping his voice down so the others wouldn't hear.

El gave him a surprised look, then tilted her head back to examine the ceiling. "Lamp," she said uncertainly, pointing.

Mike laughed. He wondered if she knew when she was being cute, or if she was totally oblivious to the fact. He thought it was probably the latter. "No, no. It's an expression," he explained. "I meant, what's wrong?"

"Oh." El's frown returned. She shrugged.

"You can tell me," Mike urged. "Friends don't lie, right?"

El just shrugged again, avoiding his gaze.

"Okay," he relented. "You don't have to if you don't want to." He kept his tone light, but Mike felt bizarrely hurt that she wouldn't tell him what was ailing her. He shook himself mentally. *Don't be such a delicate baby, Wheeler.*

"So, what do you guys want to do?" Lucas asked, plopping himself into an armchair. Max shrugged. So did El. Mike opened his mouth but Dustin cut him off.

"Well, if nobody has any ideas," the curly-haired boy began. "I happen to have brought *Blade Runner*. I figured we'd better introduce El to the classics, right?" He fished a VHS tape out of his bag and looked around at the others with a self-satisfied grin on his face.

"Oh, hell yeah, I'm down," Lucas said immediately. Dustin offered him a fist and he bumped it. "Max?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure. Nerds." Despite her tone, she didn't sound displeased. Then again, it was hardly surprising to any of them that a girl self-dubbed Mad Max would enjoy watching what was, in their opinions, one of the best geek movies ever created.

"Mike? El?" Dustin turned to them.

Mike turned to the girl at his side. "Do you want to?"

Eleven nodded, shuffling her feet excitedly. Throughout her time living with Hopper, watching movies had become her primary form of entertainment. She had worked her way through most of the VHS tapes in his house (aside from the ones he deemed inappropriate or "too goddamn awful to bother with") at least twice. Usually, she watched them alone while Hopper was working, but sometimes if he got home in the middle of a movie, he'd sit down with her for the end. El always treasured these situations; for some reason, it was far more fun watching a movie with his warm, bear-like bulk pressed against her side. She thought the idea of seeing one with her friends seemed even better.

Especially Mike. For some reason, that idea made El's face feel hot.

She wondered if *Blade Runner* had any kissing scenes. Those always excited her. Whenever she saw one, she would remember that time in the Hawkins Middle cafeteria when they were alone, and Mike had pressed his mouth to hers. At the time, El had no idea what he was doing, but she had liked it. It made her feel fluttery. And once she had seen it done in movies, it *really* made her fluttery, because she knew what it meant. *Love*.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself kissing Mike again. Her heart leapt. Sometimes she had seen kissing done slow, delicate, and romantic, but other times it was wild and passionate, and made El feel funny and almost *hot* inside. She pictured kissing Mike just like that, maybe pushing him up against a wall like they sometimes did in the movies. She felt the hot feeling coming on, stronger than ever. She stared at the floor, determined not to blush.

"El?" Mike tapped her shoulder. She blinked, raising her eyes to meet his. "Come on. Lucas is setting up the movie."

"Okay," she replied, and followed him to the sitting area.

Dustin, Lucas, and Max were sitting side by side on the couch facing the TV. With three people, they had quite a bit of room to spare; they could have comfortably managed another person. With two more, though, they were going to have to squeeze.

After a moment of hesitation, Mike sat down in the open space, which happened to be on Max's right. He scooted close to her, murmuring an apology, then patted the small remaining area next to him.

"You can sit here, El," he invited. "It'll be a little tight, but that's okay, right, guys?"

"Sure," said Lucas.

"I've always wanted to be pressed up against to you, Lucas," Dustin said, straight-faced.

"Weirdo," replied Lucas and Max at the same time.

El still hadn't sat down. She looked conflicted.

"Eleven?" Mike beckoned.

She bit her lip, looking from him to the open space. Then, after a what looked like a brief internal struggle, she said, "Want to sit there." She pointed between him and Max.

"Uh, next to me?" Max said, bewildered. Then she realized. *Oh.* She had to try hard not to roll her eyes. Well, maybe the best way to handle this was just to be friendly. Surely El would figure out eventually that Max had zero interest in her guy, right?

Yeah, or maybe she'll just kill me with her psychic shit and make it look like an accident.

"Sure, go for it," she said to El, a little too brightly. Max nudged Mike. He exchanged a mystified glance with Dustin and Lucas, who both shrugged, before scooting to the end of the couch. Eleven slotted herself into the tight space remaining and glanced at Max, who smiled at her welcomingly. El looked away.

Mike, for his part, was realizing the space situation might not be so bad after all. El's body was pressed tightly against his and he was finding he didn't mind one bit. In this close proximity, he could once again detect the vanilla scent of her dark curly hair. He desperately wanted to run his hands through it. It was probably a good thing his arms were pinned to his sides.

"Okay, ready?" Lucas said. They nodded as one. He hit play on the remote.

Two hours later, Lucas turned off the TV, abruptly silencing *Blade Runner's* end credit music. He let out an enormous yawn and stretched, cracking his knuckles one at a time.

"Watch it, Stalker," Max grumbled, dodging his elbow. Lucas flipped her the bird and Dustin took the opportunity to squirm his way free from the cramped couch.

"Well, that was good as always," he announced. The others (except Eleven), who had all seen the movie on numerous occasions before,

murmured their agreement. Dustin raised his eyebrows at the outlier. "What'd you think, El?"

She seemed to Dustin to have enjoyed it quite a bit, though he wondered if it was entirely the movie that had resulted in that enjoyment. Her head was resting comfortably on Mike's shoulder, soft brown curls spilling over his arm and chest. Her eyes were half-closed and she appeared to be almost dozing off before Dustin said her name. They opened and flicked in his direction.

"Liked it," she replied truthfully. It had been kind of scary at times, especially at the end, when the white-haired man whose name El couldn't remember had fought the main character. But it had been thrilling and gripping and when she did get scared, El found she could press herself into Mike's warm, comforting side, and her heart would steady a bit (and then pick up again for other reasons, but that was different).

Mike, meanwhile, was making no effort to move off the couch, or away from his position with El. His expression was caught somewhere between blissful and embarrassed, with a heavy emphasis on the former. Dustin caught his eye and winked conspiratorially. Mike blushed and looked away.

The group started to discuss the movie, arranging themselves into more comfortable positions. In the end, Mike and El stayed where they were on the couch. Eleven sprawled luxuriously like a cat (Mike had to concentrate to keep his eyes from traveling up and down her outstretched body and legs). Her head stayed on his shoulder, which pleased him immensely. Dustin occupied the remaining section of the couch while Max and Lucas pulled over armchairs.

From there, time passed far too quickly. It was another two hours before Hopper came home, but it felt closer to one; the conversation just flowed so easily. Though none of the group would have been able to put into words, they each felt *whole* for the first time in ages. Even Max, who was a newcomer to the party, felt it, and she treasured the newfound feeling of belonging and carefree friendliness. Mike's formerly icy disposition toward her had finally begun to thaw. The only problem was El, who still stubbornly refused to talk to her. But surely that would fade with time, right?

Right?

The conversation finally came to an end when the door swung open and Hopper walked into the cabin. He stopped at the door, clearly disgruntled by the presence of four new teenagers occupying his once-lonely cabin. And of Eleven's relaxed position sprawled across Mike, who hastily sat up, jarring her head a little in the process. She looked at him, a little confused and hurt, but he was too busy avoiding Hopper's gaze to notice.

"Hi," Dustin called brightly, smiling in a way he hoped was charming. Hopper looked at him silently for a minute. Then:

"Sorry to crash the party, but you kids have to clear off right about now. El's gotta eat dinner and we don't have enough to play host." His tone booked no argument, but it still failed to deter a certain brown-haired girl.

"But—" El protested, sitting up and glaring at the chief. The rest of the group looked at her in something approaching awe. None of them would ever dare talk back to the heavy-browed chief of police.

"No buts," Hopper cut her off. "You have to do your lessons, too."

El huffed angrily. Mike figured now was a time for appeasement; after all, the last thing he wanted was to be on the chief's shit list. Especially now that Eleven was living with him. He put a calming hand on her shoulder and she turned to meet his gaze.

"Hey," he said. "It's okay. Our parents wouldn't want us home too late anyway."

El chewed her lip unhappily.

"And," Mike added, smiling at her encouragingly. "We'll see you tomorrow, too, okay? Same time."

It was impossible for El to remain angry when he was smiling at her like that. She shrugged, giving him a little smile with one side of her mouth. "Half-way happy," she conceded reluctantly.

El walked with the group to the door and watched them file out,

wishing she could go with them.

"Bye, El," said Dustin, waving. Lucas followed him out. Mike paused.

"Three-one-five tomorrow, okay?" he said to her.

El nodded. "Three fifteen," she corrected him, glancing at Hopper. Mike smiled.

"See you," he said, and was gone. El felt a strange dull emptiness watching his face disappear from the doorway.

Max was the last out. She hesitated, looking from El to the door several times, before mumbling a hasty goodbye and darting out. El frowned. For some reason, she didn't like seeing Max's flowing waves of red hair follow Mike out the door. The feeling worsened when she pictured that same fiery hair accompanying Mike as he walked the halls of Hawkins Middle, for *hours* every day - early in the morning right up until three fifteen. Her chest tightened. It was a bad, bad feeling, one that El didn't know how to put a name to but was finding quickly that she didn't like one bit. She gritted her teeth angrily and slammed the door with her mind before turning on her heel and striding stiffly to the kitchen.

Three one five — no, three fifteen — couldn't come fast enough.

3. Chapter 3

Hey! Thanks to everyone for their feedback; Chapter 2 got really nice response and I'm, once again, grateful to everyone who read and commented. Enjoy!

The next few days passed with a similar structure. The boys and Max would slog through school before racing over to Hopper's house and spending the rest of the afternoon with Eleven. Usually they'd be kicked out by Hopper some time after he returned home, but once or twice he'd relented to El's pleading and allowed Mike to stay a little bit later, joining in on dinner and sometimes even helping with her lessons afterward.

It was nearly perfect to El. Somehow she stopped being bothered by Hopper's we're-not-stupid rules. Sure, she sometimes wished she could go to school with them (though Dustin and Lucas assured her that she wasn't missing much, and even offered jokingly to trade positions with her), but she understood why she had to keep her head down, even if she didn't like it much. And anyway, the important thing was she could see her friends again. And Mike.

Especially Mike.

And, to make things better, the situation had improved even more the previous night. Hopper had come home as usual to a messy house full of loud, laughing, obnoxious teenagers. He had had a long day, his back was killing him, he was cranky, and he wanted nothing more than a smoke, a can of cold beer, and some peace and quiet. That last one sure as hell wasn't happening right now, though. So Hopper relented.

"Jesus, listen to me," he growled, bursting out of his bedroom after a futile minute of hoping the closed door would shut out the noise. The kids exchanged nervous glances.

"Sir?" Dustin said uncertainly, going to salute before remembering Hopper's previous reaction. He awkwardly changed it a back-of-the-neck scratch, fooling nobody.

"If I have to come home to you all yammering on and on for the rest of the year I'm going to blow the back of my head off," Hopper announced flatly. "So I'm giving you permission to take El outside. No, screw that. I'm *requiring* it."

Eleven gasped audibly, staring at him in surprise. Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max exchanged excited glances.

"Outside?" El breathed, hardly daring to believe it.

"Outside," Hop confirmed. "We'll have a few simple rules, of course. Just like inside." He held up a finger. "One, you *do not* go into town, under any circumstances. Play in the woods all you want, but keep El out of the main part of Hawkins." He looked at Mike as he said this, perhaps hoping he'd uphold the rules even if El wouldn't. Mike swallowed and nodded.

"Two," Hopper continued. "You do not leave El alone for even a second. Understood? I want someone with her at all times."

They all nodded again.

"And three. El has to be home before eight every day." He looked at each teenager in turn. "Am I clear on that?"

"Yes, sir," they mumbled.

"So that means even if El wants to break the rules—" He jerked a thumb at her. "—I'm trusting you all to be responsible and uphold them. Am I right to be trusting you?"

"Yes, sir!" came another chorus.

He had nodded stiffly and turned, striding back into his room. El stuck her tongue out at his receding form.

Today, after school, they had met El, as usual, at the cabin. This time, however, she was waiting for them outside, outfitted in a slightly oversized brown jacket. With great enthusiasm, she had run to greet them, visibly bursting with excitement, and announced that she wanted to explore the woods. The boys and Max agreed readily. Hopper's cabin didn't have a whole lot to do; it got kind of repetitive

after a few days.

They had been idly wandering and chit-chatting for a little over an hour when Lucas put forward an idea.

"Hey, let's play manhunt," he suggested.

"Manhunt?" El repeated, eyes wide. The name had an ominous sound to it.

"It's fun, El," Max promised. She was relentlessly determined to maintain her friendliness toward the curly-haired girl. "Like tag."

"Tag?" El repeated again, narrowing her brown eyes distrustfully.

Max suppressed a sigh. *I really need to do something about this.* "Yeah, it's—"

"She's right, El, it's fun," Mike said encouragingly. Max winced as El's gaze swung to him, back to her, and back to Mike again wordlessly.

Not helping, Wheeler, Max thought, cringing under El's piercing glare. *I really need to do something about this.*

They did end up playing. Dustin and Lucas added their voices to Mike's and El relented, reluctantly accepting that the fact that Max liked something did not make it bad by default. After all, El was certain she liked Mike, and he was just about the goodest (was that a word? El was pretty sure it was a word.) person alive.

Once the rules had been explained and the game began, El immediately started to enjoy herself. Lucas was "It" first, and that round ended quickly; he was the fastest by a solid margin, and captured the other members of the party methodically, one by one.

Dustin was It next, though, and he was a good deal slower. Eleven hid in a clump of bushes with Mike, Lucas, and Max, and they watched Dustin walk right past them a couple times. Eventually he found them; Eleven couldn't restrain a giggle when he passed just ten or so feet away. They scattered, shrieking with glee, as Dustin bellowed in triumph and charged their bush. He ended up following

El. She felt that wonderful thrill of excitement and fear that stems from a good chase; it sent adrenaline rushing through her body, giving her a surge of energy. She ran as fast as she could, heart pounding in her ears, and, small and lightweight as she was, began to pull ahead of Dustin. But the hilarity of the situation was getting to her, and eventually she collapsed, rolling on her back and gasping with laughter. Dustin closed in, grinning down at her.

"No," she wheezed between laughs, trying to get up and failing.

"Yes," he said triumphantly, and leaned down to tag her shoulder. El wiped tears from her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to quell her giggles.

"Now you're on my team," Dustin informed her, grabbing her hand and pulling her to her feet. "So do us a favor and go and tag your boyfriend."

El brushed dead leaves off her coat and tilted her head questioningly. "What is boyfriend?"

Dustin shook his head. "Jesus, I forget sometimes," he said fondly, ruffling her curly hair. "A boyfriend is... well..." A sudden sly smile crossed his face. "Maybe you should ask Mike when you catch him."

She blinked, confused. "Okay," she replied uncertainly. As if on cue, the pair heard the rustle of dead, dry leaves in the distance. El turned her head to see a figure making its way toward them. Even at a distance she recognized Mike's light blue denim jacket and mane of jet-black hair. She looked at Dustin excitedly and pointed.

"Yeah, that's Mike," he agreed. "Go get 'em, Tiger."

She tilted her head again. "Tiger?"

"Never mind. Go!"

She went, setting off at a sprint and almost immediately getting the giggles again. As soon as she started moving, Mike froze. He turned his head, saw her coming, and began to run in the opposite direction, piles of dead leaves crunching with every bounding stride. For some reason this made El's giggles worse, and it slowed her down enough

to cause her to miss her desperate lunge. Her fingers brushed the denim of his jacket.

"Damn it—" she gasped — a clearly Hopper-acquired expression — and stumbled. No! She couldn't miss him. She had to ask him what a boyfriend was, right? Dustin had told her to. But she was giggling way too much to outpace him at this point.

Mike suddenly stopped in his tracks. "What the—" He, stared ahead, bemused, rubbing his face. He felt as though he had just collided with a giant, firm pillow. He realized what had happened a half-second before he suddenly flew backwards and collided with someone's very soft, very warm body, which collapsed on top of him, shrieking with laughter.

"Hey! Cheater!" he accused, trying to wrestle her off of him.

"Nuh-uh," Eleven protested, hunkering down over him desperately to avoid being thrown off. "Not a cheater. Smart."

"Well, if that's being smart, then..." Mike leaned over suddenly and grabbed a handful of leaves before throwing the pile all over El's head. She cried out in alarm as dry, brown leaves stuck in her hair. Mike took the opportunity to try and wrench himself free. He almost accomplished it, too, but El grabbed his angle and slithered back atop him, pinning him to the ground with her weight.

"Shit," Mike cursed. El smiled down at him victoriously — that perfect, crooked-toothed smile that made his heart ache. Her face was close to his. Her cheeks were pink from a combination cold and laughter; her forehead was slicked with sweat. Her lips reminded Mike rose petals. Her eyes were very dark. He wanted to kiss her.

"Hey, you two," Dustin called, ducking under a tree branch. "Sorry to ruin the moment, but while you guys were sucking face or whatever, Max just got away from me."

Mike jumped, suddenly flustered, and wriggled out from underneath El. She bit her lip, disappointed, before rising to her feet and following Mike as he walked toward Dustin.

"Where'd she go?"

"I don't know, I chased her off this way..."

It was only after the two jogged off together, scanning the woods for Max and Lucas, that El realized she had forgotten to ask Mike what a boyfriend was.

After another half an hour, the group gathered, gasping with their hands on their knees, after catching the Max and concluding the most recent round of Manhunt. They stayed like that, too breathless to talk after a long, heart-pounding chase, for several minutes. The only sounds were those of the rustle of branches and the breathing of five exhausted teenagers.

It was Dustin who finally broke the silence, with a predictable comment: "It's freezing."

"We could go back to El's," Mike suggested. El smiled. She liked that they already started calling Hopper's cabin "El's house". It was comforting, in a way, almost as if it was anchoring her to this new life that she was enjoying so much.

"Scratch that," Dustin replied. "You guys want to get hot chocolate?"

"From Frank's Bakery?" Lucas said, perking up. "I could totally go for some right now."

Max nodded in agreement, but Mike hesitated.

"Guys, El can't go into town, remember?" he pointed out. El looked at her shoes, feeling guilty. She didn't like the idea need to remain unseen would mean her friends couldn't do what they wanted to.

Lucas didn't seem perturbed, though. "It's fine," he said. "One person can wait with her in the woods, and the rest of us get hot chocolate. We'll bring back two for El and whoever stays with her."

Mike thought for a moment, then nodded, satisfied with Lucas's idea. "Sounds good," he said.

After a brief argument of which way town was ("Uh, no, idiot, *that's* north. Sun rises in the east and sets in the west, remember?" said Dustin to an eye-rolling Lucas) the group set off with a spring in their steps, excited for their hot, chocolatey drinks. Eleven thought hot chocolate sounded like a pretty poor idea, because Hopper had told her that chocolate got all melty if it was too warm, but her friends were excited, so she figured she should be as well.

By the time they got to the edge of the wood, the sun was dipping below the trees. It wasn't late yet, though; Mike's watch read 5:41, so they had plenty of time to get their hot chocolate and hang out some more before they had to retire for dinner and homework. A brisk breeze blew through the forest, stirring their hair and causing a couple of them to burrow deeper into their warm coats.

"Okay," Dustin said, turning to the others at the border of the road. "So, who wants to stay with El? Mike?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I—"

"I'll stay," Max interrupted quickly. They all turned to stare at her. Especially El, who looked nothing short of shocked.

"You?" said all of them simultaneously. Max snorted with laughter.

"Yeah, me. Why is that so surprising?"

The boys exchanged mystified glances. El chewed her lip unhappily, giving Mike a longing glance.

"Is that okay with you, El?" Max asked in an uncharacteristically friendly tone. The boys looked at each other again. What the hell was going on?

Eleven shrugged wordlessly.

"Great. Off you go, boys," Max said. She waved her hand in a gesture of dismissal.

"Uh..." Lucas was staring at her.

"Shoo. Get lost. Go get hot chocolate," Max said, flipping her long red

hair over one shoulder. "El and I need to have some girl talk." She flapped the same hand she had been waving in a mocking parody of a cliché teenage girl.

The boys backed away, mumbled something about being back soon, and then trotted off toward town, putting their heads together and whispering (loudly) as they went. They kept throwing glances back at El, who didn't notice, and Max, who pretended not to.

"So, uh... how's life, El?" Max said as soon as the boys were out of earshot. Her voice betrayed her awkwardness and she noticed, wincing. Somehow it was a lot harder to keep up the friendly act when it was just the two of them.

"Yes," El replied shortly, then frowned, biting her lip. Max noticed; it seemed to be a signature expression of hers. "Good. Meant good."

"Okay, that's, uh... that's cool," Max replied, nodding her head several times. "It's kinda chilly, isn't it?"

El looked away silently, and that was all it took. Max had intended to go into this diplomatically and maturely, but her temper had always been short, and it snapped right then and there.

"Well, if you're not gonna talk, maybe you want to tell me why you hate me so much?" she demanded, glaring.

The other girl turned back around, eyebrows raised in surprise. Her brown eyes alighted on Max's and her brows came back down, furrowing into a glare. She looked away again.

"Don't hate you," she muttered.

"Yeah?" Max replied scathingly. "Well, you do a terrible job showing it."

How does she know? El thought, bemused. She said nothing.

"I *like* you, Eleven," Max snapped. "I think you're cool and I want to be your friend."

El blinked, surprised.

"But," the redhead continued angrily. "I can't *do* that if you're just going to be bitchy all-the-fucking-time. So tell me why you hate me."

El recoiled, taken aback by the other girl's fury. "Because..." she fumbled for words, and suddenly the anger was red hot in her, too, raging inside up like a wildfire. She turned on Max. "Because you're *bad!*"

"Bad?" Max retorted, curling her lip. "Yeah? Why?"

"You love Mike!" El shouted, and all the pent-up rage and jealousy she had been containing for days spilled over in a furious tide of words and emotion. "You love Mike and you *CAN'T* love him, you're not allowed, because *I* love Mike and I *waited* for THREE-HUNDRED AND FIFTY THREE DAYS! And then... And then I see him again and YOU— you..." El thrust an accusing finger at Max, and it trembled as she searched for the right words. "You want to RUIN it, because you LOVE HIM!"

These final words were punctuated with a shockwave that erupted out from Eleven like a bomb, causing nearby trees to sway alarmingly. Max stumbled, barely avoiding falling over, and stared at the other girl, open-mouthed. As she did, tears began to pour from El's eyes, matching the bead of dark blood that rolled from her nose. She wiped it away furiously and stood, trembling but defiant, sobbing but glaring, in front of the girl she had convinced herself was trying to take away the boy she loved.

The next words that left that same girl's mouth came as a surprise.

"...You're an idiot, Eleven."

El blinked. Her vision was blurry with tears. "I—"

"You've been telling yourself this stupid fucking story because you're a *child*," Max growled. "You're a dumb child and you're delusional."

Eleven didn't know what delusional meant, but she knew what it meant to call someone a child. "You—"

"Listen to me. *Listen*, because I'm tired of this stupid jealousy bullshit you've been giving me since the first *second* we met. I. Don't. Love.

Mike."

"You— what?" El blinked again.

"You heard me."

"But—"

Max ignored her, pressing her advantage. "I have no interest in him. Oh, he seems like a nice enough guy. We're becoming friends, I think — finally. But it will never be anything more than that. Understand?"

El was silent.

"And you know what else?" Max added.

El looked at her uncertainly.

"I'll even tell you who I *do* like," Max said. "It's Lucas."

"Lucas?" El repeated, dumbfounded.

"Lucas," Max confirmed.

There was a moment of silence. Then:

"Why?"

Max threw back her head and laughed, long and loud. "Yeah, sometimes I ask myself that, too," she snorted.

El blushed. That hadn't been what she meant. She liked Lucas, too; he was her friend. She just didn't understand why, when Mike existed, anybody would want to love anybody *except* for him. Somehow, though, she didn't think expressing this to Max seemed like a good idea, so she stayed silent.

Max leaned forward. "So, do you believe me now? Is your dumb jealous phase over? Can we finally fucking be *friends* now without all this bullshit in the way?"

As quickly as El's anger had flared, she felt it receding, to be replaced by overwhelming embarrassment and shame. Even as a girl whose

primary form of education was soap operas, she was far from stupid. And she was suddenly aware of how childish her behavior had been. She nodded, unable to meet Max's gaze.

"Yes," she said quietly, staring at her feet. She felt like her face was on fire. "I... I'm sorry. For getting angry and... jel— jelly..."

"Jealous," Max corrected. "It's okay. I'm sorry for calling you an idiot."

"No. You're right," El mumbled, shamefaced. "Was being stupid."

"Yeah, you were," Max agreed. She grinned. "But who cares? Everyone's stupid sometimes. I mean, look at Lucas."

El laughed, and Max felt a huge pressure lift from her chest to be replaced with a warm, satisfied glow. *Success. Fucking finally.*

After a brief pause, Eleven glanced up at her shyly. "You... really like him?"

"Mhm," Max confirmed. "And if the dumbass can actually work up the guts to ask me out, I want to go with him to that Snowball thing all the kids at school are talking about."

"The Snowball!" El gasped, eyes widening.

"Yeah. Did Mike ask you yet?" Max asked. El shook her head, frowning.

"He did, but... before," she said, biting her lip.

"Before you went away?" said Max. El nodded. "Well, I'm sure he'll ask you again. It's in, like, a month, so he'll probably do it soon."

El maintained her frown. She felt a familiar flicker of doubt in her chest, only this time, it wasn't aimed at Max. Had Mike ever really told her that he loved her the same way she loved him? El was pretty sure he hadn't. But what if that was because he *didn't*? Sure, he had kissed her (as always, El felt a little thrill, remembering), but that had been almost a year ago. What if he didn't like her anymore that same way? What if... how had that one movie put it? What if he had *moved on*?

She pushed the thought aside. She was too relieved at finding out Max wasn't going to steal Mike away to dampen her mood with pessimism.

She turned to Max. In the previous year, when Mike and Lucas had gotten into a fight, they had resolved it by doing a thing with their hands. Shaking, El thought Dustin had called it, though their hands had looked pretty steady to her.

She mimicked their gesture now, extending her right hand toward Max.

"Friends?" she offered, with a tentative smile.

Max grinned. "Friends," the redhead confirmed, and shook.

4. Chapter 4

Hey! Sorry, I know it's been a little while since Chapter 3. I had a bit of a busy week and spent all of yesterday traveling for Thanksgiving vacation, so I couldn't find a lot of time to write. I'll be out of the country until next Saturday, so updates till then might be a little slow and spotty, but I'll do my best.

Enjoy! As always reviews are welcome.

"I can't believe you're going on a date with Steve Harrington." Lucas shook his head in a mixture of disbelief and gleeful amusement. Will, who Joyce had just two days prior deemed ready return to school, chuckled from his side. They had just reached the conclusion of another long day, and were retrieving coats and notebooks from their lockers.

"I told you, it's not a date," Dustin insisted, scowling as he pulled on a puffy down jacket. "We're just going to see *Nightmare on Elm Street*."

Lucas sniggered. "Sounds like a date to me. A nice, cozy movie theatre..."

"Shut up! I'm only going with him because it's R-rated and I can't get in alone," Dustin shot back. "Anyway, you're a filthy hypocrite, with your little arcade date with Max."

"Keep your voice down!" Lucas hissed, glancing over his shoulder nervously. "And *I* told you, it's not a date, okay?"

Dustin raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Okay."

"Will's coming, too! Aren't you, Will?" Lucas turned to look at the small Byers boy, who seemed alarmed.

"I, uh— I mean, I was going to, but if you don't me to crash your date I totally understand—"

"No!" Lucas exclaimed, stamping his foot frustratedly. "You won't be crashing it, because *it's not a date*. We're just gonna try to beat the

high score on Galaga."

Dustin just shook his head. "Well, good luck. Try to save the making out until after Will goes home, if you can bear it."

Lucas fumed, glaring at his insufferable friend. "I'm going to—"

But Dustin never found out what exactly he was going to do, because Max herself chose that moment to turn the hall corner, chatting happily with Mike. Dustin had no idea what had caused it, but by some miracle of the universe, the storm of tension that had been constantly raging around the two of them (and, even more so, around Max and Eleven) had vanished out of nowhere. He had no idea what caused the change — or what had been causing the tension in the first place, for that matter — but he wasn't complaining. It certainly made their hangouts a lot less awkward.

Max and Mike reached the other three. Greetings were exchanged as they began to root around in their lockers, dumping off binders and withdrawing jackets and scarves.

"So, we still on for the arcade?" Max asked, jamming on a fleece hat and looking at Lucas and Will.

"Yep," replied Lucas, stepping on Dustin's foot before he could say anything. Will nodded in agreement.

"Mike, Dustin?" Max turned to them.

"Dustin's too busy pursuing older men," Lucas told her, snickering.

"Huh?"

"I don't pur—" Dustin started.

"He has a date with Steve Harrington."

"Steve Harrington?" Mike repeated incredulously. "What the hell?"

"For the last time," Dustin snapped, glaring at Lucas. "It's not a date. He's just getting me into *Nightmare on Elm Street*, you creep."

"Ooo-kay," said Max, staring at Dustin in alarm. "Well, uh... use protection?"

"Guys!" he howled in protest, throwing his hands up in frustration. "It's. Not. A. Date. I don't have a fucking crush on Steve. I'm not gay and he's not a pedophile."

"Yeah, better hope not," Max sniggered. Lucas guffawed. Her grin widened.

"Not cool," Dustin told her. Max gave him the finger and turned to Mike.

"What about you, Wheeler? Have any arrangements with sugar daddies, or do you want to come with us?"

"Uh, no, sorry," Mike refused apologetically. "I... promised my mom I'd help her with something." This was not, of course, the truth, but somehow the lie felt less awkward than telling his friends the real reason he couldn't come: it would be his first opportunity spend a whole, uninterrupted afternoon with El. Just the two of them. And he sure as hell wasn't passing that up, not even for the arcade.

"Bummer," replied Max.

The group walked together to the bike rack before parting ways. Dustin pedaled off hard toward the middle of town, claiming he was going to meet Steve outside the movie theater. Lucas was unable to resist a parting shout of "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!", causing Max to burst into waves of laughter. The sound made him feel warm inside.

Mike left next; he waved goodbye to the others and mounted his own bike, reaching the road and making a left turn. They watched him go.

"What a joke," Lucas commented, shaking his head. "He's not even going in the same direction as his house. He could at least pretend."

Will smiled. "Ah, just let him be. This is the first time since she got back that he'll be able to spend real alone time with her, isn't it?"

Lucas scoffed. "You're too nice, Byers. Imagine all the ammunition we

could get on him."

Will shrugged amiably. "Will the Wise," he joked. "Someone has to have a high Diplomacy score, right?"

Max snorted in amusement. "Sometimes I have no idea why I hang out with you nerds."

Lucas and Will glanced at each other.

"Hypocrite," they said in unison, and bumped fists.

While he biked to Hopper's cabin, Mike thought about Eleven. For a change.

He wondered if she knew how he felt about her. He doubted it. How could she? She'd never had any interaction with people her age before him and his friends. She wouldn't be able to tell what his feelings toward her were, not without him telling her outright. Hell, did she even know what love was?

Because it was love. Not a crush, not those stupid things the girls at school liked to giggle about. Nor was it one of those scenarios that some kids Mike's age were starting to get into as they reached teenage-hood, where they would pour their hearts into confessions of undying devotion before going through a tearful breakup the following week and promptly getting over it the next. No, it was most definitely love, and Mike was practical-minded enough to realize when he was being naive. He knew this was not one of those times.

Not that he'd ever express that to someone, though. Who would understand? Nancy? He couldn't get a private moment with her away from Jonathan (who she "wasn't dating" — yeah, sure). His mom? No way. She'd give him a lecture about how kids couldn't begin to imagine what love meant. His dad? Come on.

His friends? That was different; Mike knew they would understand, especially Lucas and Dustin, who had been with him the week El first came to Hawkins. But even so, he hesitated. How could he express that without seeming like a total cheeseball? How could he explain

without sounding gushy that no, it wasn't a *crush*, it wasn't *like*; it was a *presence*, an essential part of him just as much as his bones and muscle and tissue and organs were, so deeply embedded he knew it would never fade. He didn't just daydream about her (though he did do that quite a lot); he *lived* with her face in his heart at all times, a constant specter so powerful and so overwhelming that sometimes (often) it hurt.

Even to him it sounded stupid. Mike huffed a sigh and pedaled faster, hunkering down against the chilly wind. At least he was going to see her now. That was sure to brighten his day.

It took another fifteen or so minutes to get to Hopper's house. Mike dismounted his bike and let it fall. He didn't bother chaining it up; the Hawkins chief-of-police's little cabin was isolated enough that theft wasn't a concern. He straightened his jacket and ruffled up his hair a little. A few days back Eleven had told him, in that matter-of-fact way she had, that she liked how curly it had gotten. He had taken special care to make it extra messy whenever he saw her since then.

Mike took a deep breath, cursing himself for being nervous, and ascended the steps. He knocked and took a step back. Just a few seconds later, he heard running foot steps on floorboards — a sound he had grown accustomed to — and the door cracked open. El's shaggy head peeked through the gap, settled on him, and broke into a smile. The door opened further and she lunged out, practically falling into his arms.

"Hey," he greeted, reeling a little from the wonderful sensation of the hug. "It's just me today. Dustin's hanging out with Steve and everyone else is at the arcade."

El released him (a sad fact) and blinked worriedly. "You didn't want to go?"

"I, ah..." Mike rubbed the back of his neck embarrassedly. "I didn't want to leave you alone here. I figured you'd, you know, get bored."

"Oh," was all El could think to say. She felt rather touched that he had chosen to come see her in favor of the arcade with his friends. A

wave of that hot, gooey thing that she supposed was love surged through her. She stared at him, forgetting to respond.

"Do you want to go inside?" Mike suggested after the silence drew on for a few seconds too long. "I thought maybe we could play a game or watch a movie, or something?"

El nodded. "Okay," she agreed happily, stepping aside to let him in. Secretly, she felt a little pleased that he was the only one able to come. She loved her friends — even Max, after the incident a couple of days back, and Will, who she had only really met two days ago — but time alone with Mike was hard to come by.

She closed the door and followed him to her room. He sat on her bed, rooted around in his bag for a moment, and came up with a compact wooden box.

"So, I was thinking maybe I could introduce you to Scrabble?" Mike said, showing her the box. It had letters on little squares all over the lid.

"Scrabble?" El asked, looking from the game to him.

"Yeah, it's a board game, just like D&D," Mike told her. "Only the goal is to make words. I'm pretty good at it, so nobody else in the group except Will likes to play with me anymore." He rubbed his neck embarrassedly. "It's a lot more fun than I'm making it sound. But we don't have to if—"

"I want to," El said quickly. If Mike enjoyed it, it had to be fun, right? And besides, she liked when he taught her new things. He'd always lean close and look at her so sincerely with his pretty brown eyes, and speak so gently and patiently. It struck El as very romantic.

"Okay," he replied, sounding relieved. "Cool."

He began to set up the game, explaining the rules to her as he did. It sounded complicated, but as soon as they started to play, El started to get the hang of it. She was an extraordinarily quick learner. In competence, however, she was understandably lacking. Eleven had barely any experience with reading and writing; she knew the

alphabet, and could sound out most words decently, but not much more. Hopper's lessons had helped with that, but it was a tough subject, and progress was coming more slowly than she would have liked.

Mike was endlessly patient, though. He gently corrected her whenever she made a spelling mistake, and, in the event that she couldn't find a word to make, he'd lean across the bed and help her, often scoring high-point words against himself. She made sure to thank him sincerely whenever he did that. It always made his face turn pink, for some reason.

In short, she was enjoying the game thoroughly, in no small part because of Mike's presence. And even during his turns, which sometimes took several minutes, El wasn't bored. She filled the time watching Mike's face, not looking as much as *absorbing*. In the fateful week of their first meeting, El had grown to think of Mike as pretty, with his hair like the night sky and little dusting of freckles across his nose. She would feel a funny little fluttering in her heart whenever she pictured his face, like a butterfly trapped in her chest. However, in the year of their separation, he had changed significantly, for reasons she could not guess at (though El was perfectly capable of observing the effects of puberty, she could not have put the process to name).

She had no complaints, though. Mike had grown into a startlingly good-looking teenager. He had grown taller, leaner, and his facial features had sharpened and hardened, abandoning the smooth roundness that had persisted from childhood. Dark, wide set eyes, high cheekbones, full lips and a mane of curly black hair gave him a classically and effortlessly handsome appearance that reminded El of the men on the covers of those rock n' roll records Hopper would sometimes show her. And when he would stare through narrowed eyes down at the game board, tongue between his teeth as he concentrated, El felt waves of adoration pulse through her.

"Your turn," he said, jerking El from her reverie as he turned the board toward her. He had just put down the word "Extract" for some vast quantity of points.

El spent a minute staring hard at the board, trying to find good word.

Eventually, she put down "Boy" for a respectable (for her) fifteen points.

"That's really good, El," Mike congratulated, smiling at her warmly. Her heart fluttered.

He took back the board, examined it, and, after only a few seconds, added the letters F-R-I-E-N-D to El's B-O-Y. She stared, lips moving silently as she tried to sound it out. Boy... fry-end? Free-end... *friend*.

"Oh!" El exclaimed. "Boyfriend!" The word brought the memories of the Manhunt day rushing back to her. She had never asked Mike like Dustin had told her to, and the word had since slipped her mind. Seeing it now, though, El felt a rush of excitement. "Mike, what is boyfriend?" she asked, tugging his sleeve.

"Oh— it's, uh..." Mike cleared his throat. For some reason, he was pink again. "It's... well... you know what marriage is?"

El nodded. She had seen a wedding in a movie once and asked Hopper what it was. It had seemed exciting to her; all the women were wearing pretty dresses and the men strapping suits. And there had been music and dancing and cake.

"Well," said Mike. "Before two people get married, they date."

"Date?"

"Yeah, date. When two people really like each other, they date. And they do, you know, couple things."

"Couple things?"

"Like... spend time together, see movies, hug, kiss..." The mention of a kiss caused both Mike and El to redden, though both were too caught up in their own embarrassment to notice each other's. "Stuff like that," Mike concluded lamely. "So a boyfriend is like a husband, only before the marriage."

"Oh," El replied. A question crossed her mind. She bit it back, eyes flitting nervously to Mike, but after a moment, her curiosity overpowered her anxiety. "Are..." She swallowed. "Are you my

boyfriend?"

"What?" Mike sputtered, turning beet-red. "N-no, no. Of course not."

El looked away. "Oh," she replied. Her voice had become quiet. "Okay."

A silence passed between them, painfully awkward and, out of nowhere, filled with tension so thick it was almost pulpy. After a borderline unbearable minute, Mike cleared his throat.

"Do you want to finish the game?" he suggested weakly.

El turned away, her nose in the air, and stood from the bed. "Don't feel like it," she said frostily, and left the room.

Ah, shit, Mike thought, his heart sinking. He jumped up hastily and followed her. She was sitting on the couch in the living room, staring pointedly out the window. Her delicate nose was turned up in an expression he had never seen before on her face: haughtiness.

"El?" he said tentatively.

She didn't respond.

"El, I—"

"I think," she said, carefully and deliberately picking her words, "you should leave."

Mike stared at her. The sinking feeling increased. "El—"

"Please." There was a note of desperation in her voice now.

"...Okay." Mike felt like his heart had, at this point, dropped right out of his body. He slung his bag onto his shoulder, despondent as a person could be, and tread slowly to the door. "See... see you later?"

Eleven didn't respond.

Mike heaved something that was half sigh, half frustrated sob and shut the door. Then he hit himself on the forehead, hard.

Idiot, he cursed himself. *You goddamn idiot.*

He didn't even know what he had said to piss her off . For a boy who tread the line of genius on a regular basis, Michael Wheeler could, at times, be extraordinarily stupid.

As soon as the door closed behind Mike, Eleven abandoned her offended expression and crumpled face down onto the couch. Tears began to form in the corner of her eyes and soak the corduroy cushions. She wiped them away angrily.

No, of course not. El could hear Mike's voice clear as though he was still in the room with her. He wasn't her boyfriend; of course he wasn't. She had been so stupid to think he would reciprocate her feelings. That kiss had been a whole year ago. It was just like in the movies: in the time El had been away, Mike had moved on.

El blinked away another wave of tears and stormed to her room, mentally wrenching open the door before it was in touching distance. She moved to throw herself onto the bed, then stopped.

The game of Scrabble lay, unfinished, on the blankets. El could see her and Mike's impressions, opposite blobs across the board. Unthinkingly, her eyes jumped to one word: B-O-Y-F-R-I-E-N-D.

El swept the game off the bed, fell onto the blankets, hugged a pillow, and cried.

5. Chapter 5

Well, in a happy turn of events, I managed to snag some alone time right when the inspiration hit. So enjoy Chapter 5!

"No, idiot, like *this*," Max said, and bent her knees, executing a flawlessly smooth left turn. She dismounted her skateboard and kicked it up into her hand, offering it out to Lucas. He took it, scowling.

"I don't know what *this* means," he retorted. "You make it look so easy but—"

"Uh-oh, Stalker, was that a compliment?" she cut in, grinning slyly.

Lucas became immediately flustered. "I—uh, no—"

Mike sighed, watching them from his seated position on the side of the schoolyard. It was lunchtime. The group had, for a change, opted not to go to the AV club, but instead to go outside and enjoy the weather. It was a warm day for mid-November. On Mike's right, Dustin and Will were arguing fiercely about comics. Mike wasn't listening. He was too busy feeling sorry for himself.

It wasn't fair. Lucas and Max had it so *easy*. It was obvious that they were going to end up going out; the only matter that could be questioned was whether it would happen before or after the Snow Ball. Mike was happy for them both. Lucas was his best friend, and after El had come back and Mike had finally allowed himself to think objectively, he had to admit Max was pretty cool. She was smart as a whip, funny, as geeky or geekier than all the boys, and game for anything. Mike felt a twinge of guilt every time he looked at her for the way he had behaved to her at the beginning. He figured he should apologize, and he intended to if he could ever get her away from Lucas for more than five seconds. Of course, that was easier said than done. The two were inseparable. Their constant flirting got on Mike's nerves at times, and it would do so more frequently if he didn't find it so charming (not that he'd ever admit it).

So, Lucas and Max. Done-zo. Dream pair. Han Solo and Princess Leia. Woo hoo, good for them.

But what about him and El?

It's not fair, Mike thought again. For sure, he felt El's rudimentary grasp of English and societal norms was cripplingly adorable and he secretly hoped she never grew out of it. But it had its inconveniences, and Mike was finding that a major one was that, in certain circumstances, she could be incredibly hard to read — for him, at least.

For example, what the hell was up with her yesterday?

She had gotten so pissed and, it had been out of nowhere. She had just asked him what a boyfriend was, right? And he had explained and that had made her angry?

Or was it because he had said he wasn't her boyfriend right at the end?

But if that's what had pissed her off... did that mean that El liked him? The thought made Mike's heart skip a beat or three. But that brought him back to square one. Her behavior was just too hard to read. Mike closed his eyes and tried to review the facts objectively.

She was extremely affectionate, of course. She would rest her head on his shoulder, touch his hand and his face, stuff like that. Mike was reasonably confident that he was, before yesterday at least, her favorite member of the party.

The problem was, what did that mean with Eleven? Growing up in a laboratory didn't give the poor girl a lot to go off of for social education. She had none of a school-kid's understanding of societal norms or what constituted generally appropriate friendly behavior. Maybe her affection was just how she showed friendship.

Or... did she love him the way he loved her? Did she close her eyes and see his face, swimming in front of her like a taunting mirage, cruelly close but somehow just out of reach?

Or (and in Mike's pessimistic opinion, this seemed the more likely

possibility), did she see him as her best friend? Like a brother or a guy cousin? Mike remembered their conversation last year in the cafeteria, when he had brought up his hope that they could live together after the bad men were gone. She had said, "will you be like my brother?"

Mike sighed sadly and rested his chin on his knee.

"Mike?" Dustin was leaning over, waving his hands in Mike's face. "Hello? Anybody in there?"

Mike slapped his hand away, suddenly realizing that the other boy had been trying to get his attention. "Yeah, yeah, sorry. I was just... thinking."

Lucas squinted at him suspiciously. "What's up with you?"

Mike looked away. "Nothing's up with me."

"No, he's right," Max spoke up, frowning and dismounting her skateboard. She kicked it up into her hand. "You've been acting weird for days."

"No, I haven't," Mike protested, rising and brushing off his pants.

"You have," Dustin insisted. "What's wrong?"

"*Nothing's* wrong," Mike snapped. "You're all so nosy. Will, back me up?" He looked at his friend in desperation.

Will shook his head, shrugging apologetically. "Sorry, Mike, but I think they're right. You can tell us, you know. We won't judge, whatever it is."

Dustin grinned. "Well, we might if—" Lucas punched him with his shoulder and Dustin fell quiet. "Jeez, I was joking," he muttered resentfully, rubbing his arm.

Mike was silent for a long moment. Then, he mumbled, "You'd all laugh at me."

"So it *is* something!" Lucas crowed triumphantly. "I knew it."

"We won't laugh," Will said. "We promise, right, guys?"

"Sure," agreed Dustin and Lucas.

"Pinky swear," Max said dryly. "Now spit it out, Wheeler."

Mike took a deep breath, staring at his shoes. He was blushing.

"I..." Mike swallowed. *Fuck it.* "I like Eleven, okay?" He glared around at each of them in turn, daring them to laugh. For a second, nobody did. Nobody said a word.

Then Max sniggered. Lucas followed suit, then Dustin, and before long they were all doubled over, roaring great gales of laughter so powerful that tears began to stream from their eyes. Will weakly protested at first, looking at Mike sympathetically, but before long he was laughing, too.

Mike, however, was not. "I *knew* you'd laugh," he said accusingly. "You're all pricks, you know that?" Obscenely, annoyingly, he felt hot tears forming in his eyes. He wiped them away angrily, then turned on his heel and began to storm away from his howling friends.

"Mike!" Dustin shouted breathlessly. "Wait, we—" He burst into fresh laughter again, and was unable to continue.

"Mike!" Will called, hopelessly watching his friend's rapidly receding form. Mike didn't pay him attention.

"Hey, wait." In a few swift kicks, Max caught up to Mike on her skateboard, turning in front of him and cutting him off before dismounting. "We're not laughing because you like her, okay?"

"Yeah?" Mike replied scathingly. "Sure seems like you are."

"No, actually, we're not," Max retorted, tossing her fiery hair. "We're laughing because you're an idiot."

"What?" Mike was caught off-guard.

"Listen, dumbass." Max softened the last word, her tone affectionate rather than cutting. "We're laughing because you thought we didn't

know already. And come on, you *know* that's ridiculous."

Mike stared at her, reddening. "You—you knew?"

Max snorted. "I knew before I met her. I knew from the first time you ever talked about her around me." She clasped her hands to her cheeks, mocking him. "And El," she parodied in a high, whimsical tone. "El is our mage."

Mike flushed even darker. "Yeah, yeah," he muttered, but his tone was far less tight than before.

"And come on," Max continued, pressing her advantage. "The way you act around her? It's totally obvious."

"Uh — how do I act around her?" Mike asked nervously, simultaneously wanting and not wanting to hear her answer.

She grinned. "Well, let's see. You stare at her even if she's not the one talking. And then you miss things we say because you're too busy ogling her."

"I do not—"

Lucas, Dustin, and Will had caught up to them. Dustin now added his voice to Max's.

"And then you always want to do whatever it is she wants to do, even if it's not something you usually like," he interrupted.

"And whenever there's a debate or an argument you always pick her side," chipped in Lucas.

"You always get all fidgety and red whenever she touches you." Max again.

"And you baby her all the time. When she doesn't know something you jump to be the first to explain it," said Lucas.

"Yeah, and then when you do, you speak in this really gentle voice," piped up Will for the first time.

"You always stay for a little longer after we all leave Hopper's house," said Lucas.

"Oh, and then there's the fact that you literally *counted the days* after she disappeared," said Dustin.

Mike stared at him. "What? How the hell do you know that?"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Seriously, Mike, you think in three hundred and sixty-whatever—"

"Three hundred and fifty three."

Dustin threw up his hands in a *see-what-I-mean?* gesture. "There you go. You think in three hundred and fifty three days our Supercoms are never going to be accidentally tuned to the same channel as yours? We just didn't say anything because we knew what you were going through and didn't want to make you feel embarrassed about it, man."

Mike shrugged and mumbled something incoherently, staring at his feet. After a minute, he said in a small voice, "Am I really that obvious?"

Lucas put a hand on his shoulder. "Yep."

They all chuckled. This time, Mike managed a smile too. After a second, however, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"Anyway, guys, it doesn't matter," he said. "She doesn't like me like that." Mike sighed, brow creasing sadly, then looked up to a chorus of groans.

"Jesus H. Christ," Dustin snorted, slapping his forehead in despair.

"Is he serious?" Lucas said incredulously to Max and Will, who both shrugged.

"What?" Mike said, looking from person to person.

"Mike, she *obviously* likes you," Lucas exclaimed, tone stuck somewhere between amused and exasperated.

"She does?" Mike's eyes widened. He felt like his heart had just lifted a good few inches in his chest.

"No shit," said Dustin. "She's even worse than you are." He opened his eyes wide and started fluttering his lashes, clasping his hands together. "Mike," he mimicked. "Mike, you're so handsome and strong and oh so good to me. Oh Mike!"

Mike's eyes had brightened considerably, but a twinge of doubt still remained in his face. "I don't know..."

Then Max let out a short, barking sigh. "Oh, for the love of—" She took a deep breath. "Mike, can I talk to you for a second? Alone?"

"Uh—" Mike stuttered, but Max had already grabbed his arm and was dragging him away from his friends. He mouthed 'help', but they just shrugged at him.

"Listen," Max said, releasing his sleeve. "I know for a *fact* that she likes you, okay."

Mike made a face. "Yeah, you think so, but you can't know for certain —"

"I do know," Max said firmly. "I know because she told me."

Mike stopped in his tracks, mouth falling open. "What?"

"Yep," said the redhead. "You remember the day we played Manhunt? First day Hopper let her outside?"

"Yeah..."

"As soon as you guys went to get hot chocolate, she started to scream at me," Max told him. "And I really mean scream. She was pissed."

Mike stared at her. "What? Why?"

"I don't know," Max shrugged, rolling her eyes. "She thought I was into you and I was going to steal you away, or something."

"Huh?" Mike looked hopelessly confused. "*You?* No way." He blushed.

"I mean, no offense or anything, but—"

"Yeah, I get it," Max replied dryly. "Not really hot on the idea myself. But she got angry. She even started crying, actually, until I told her that you're not exactly my type."

"Jeez," replied Mike. He had started to grin, a little guiltily. El getting jealous of Max... He knew it wasn't something that should've made him happy, but he couldn't help it. She really liked him? Like that? Not a brother, not a cousin, but a...

Boyfriend?

"Yeah, jeez," Max agreed. "I'm telling you this privately so you don't embarrass yourself even worse than you already have. So do me a favor and don't tell El I told you, okay?"

"Yeah, of course," Mike promised quickly. "Thanks, Max. Thanks a lot."

"Welcome," Max told him, tossing her bright orange hair. "You better get over there after school and ask her, Wheeler. I'm tired of you two dancing around each other."

Mike blushed, grinning sheepishly. "I... yeah. I will."

The two started to walk back to the others. Max had to suppress an eye-roll at the new spring that had appeared in Mike's step.

"So what was that about?" Lucas demanded as soon as they were within earshot, looking between the pair expectantly.

"None of your business, stalker," Max replied coolly. Lucas glared at her, opening his mouth to reply when the ring of the bell pierced the crisp autumn air, signaling the end of lunch. Mike tuned out their bickering as the group headed back toward the school building. His mind was racing.

El liked him. El got jealous of Max. Which meant the whole boyfriend thing *was* why she had gotten pissed at him yesterday. Which meant he had to get his ass to Hopper's house after school, get down on his dumbass knees, and apologize to her.

I wonder if I should get her flowers, Mike wondered. No, way too cliché. For now. At least wait until we're dating.

Until we're dating. Mike grinned like an idiot and looked at the ground as he walked. The grin promptly vanished when he remembered Eleven's face when she had told him to leave the previous day. Damn, he really, *really* needed to apologize.

The end of this school day was going to be yet another long one.

Chapters 5 and 6 were going to be combined, but it ended up being pretty long so I cut it in half. In hind sight, this chapter was pretty much entirely dialogue, but oh well. On the bright side, that means Chapter 6 should be out sooner rather than later, so stay tuned. Thanks for reading!

6. Chapter 6

So in an unfortunate turn of events, I actually *did* manage to find time to write, but my internet went out for three days. Oh well. On the bright side that means I have a couple chapters already finished, so the next few updates will come soon! Enjoy!

The end of the school day was indeed long and grueling. For what felt like the umpteenth time in the past couple weeks, Mike found himself completely unable to concentrate. He kept spacing out, the teacher's voice fading to a distant drone, and rehearsing the conversation he knew he'd have to have in a couple of hours. In his fantasy, he knocked on the door. El opened it and he fell to his knees, telling her how sorry he was and how much he loved her. She would reach down and hug him and tell him it was okay and that she was sorry, too. And then they would kiss for a very long time.

The more pessimistic side of Mike's brain suggested a very different turn of events, however. It involved El tossing him around like a sack of potatoes and screaming obscenities at him that, realistically, she probably didn't even know. Then she would force him out the door and tell him that she was done with him forever, and that she would never forgive him. (Caught up in his wild thoughts, Mike had massively overinflated the seriousness of the events that had transpired yesterday. He had, to put it bluntly, simply forgotten just how trivial the conflict had been)

The bell rang, and Mike headed to his last period of the day: Biology with Mr. Clarke. Usually his favorite class, but he doubted he'd be able to enjoy it right now.

He got to the room before anyone else, and was greeted by a very familiar and very enthusiastic mustache that seemed to block out everything else in Mike's vision.

"Hiya, Mike," greeted Mr. Clarke with his usual almost childlike excitement. "How's it going?"

"It's going okay," the teenager replied with a shrug.

"We'll be covering homozygotes versus heterozygotes today," Mr. Clarke told him, rubbing his long, slender hands together. "Very interesting subject. I think the class will really enjoy it, don't you?"

"Yeah, probably," Mike agreed, though he privately doubted most of the kids would hear anything Mr. Clarke said past the prefix "homo".

The rest of the class began to assemble outside. Mr. Clarke greeted each student with a customary firm handshake before letting them inside. Mike headed to his usual desk was taking out his notebook when Dustin plopped down into the seat beside him. He nodded a greeting at Mike and removed his baseball cap to ruffle up his mass of curly hair. Then he leaned over, speaking in a low, conspiratorial voice.

"So, are you gonna ask her?" he asked eagerly.

"Ask who what?" Mike inquired, though he knew exactly what Dustin meant.

"What do you think, you dolt?" Dustin replied, rolling his eyes. "Are you going to ask El out? After school?"

Mike blushed. *I really need to get used to this*, he thought. "Ah... yeah, maybe. Just need to find the right moment, you know?"

Dustin groaned. "Come on, Mike. You don't need a *right moment*, the girl's head over heels for you. I thought we convinced you in the yard."

"You did," Mike assured him. "Or Max did, anyway." He sighed. "It's just... I don't know. I—I'm kind of nervous, I guess."

Dustin shook his head in a mixture of fondness and exasperation. He leaned over again and pinched Mike's cheek. Mike wrestled him off irritably.

Dustin persisted. "Awww," he crooned, grinning. "Mikey's got a *cruu-uush...*"

"Oh, fuck off," Mike grumbled, reddening. "Like I could help it."

Dustin's grin widened. "Yeah, because El's so irresistible, isn't she? Do you *looove* her?"

"That's not what I meant!" Mike protested. It was exactly what he had meant. "It's... it's an evolutionary thing, okay? An instinctive desire to reproduce, or whatever. It's not my *choice*."

Dustin groaned and put his head in his hands.

"What?" Mike demanded.

"Man," Dustin said, lifting his eyes back to Mike's. "When you finally do get around to asking her out, *please* don't say 'I have an instinctive and evolutionary desire to reproduce with you.' Or anything along those lines. Please."

"I'm not an idiot!" Mike snapped.

"Just checking."

When the final bell rang, Mike was up and out of his seat by the time Dustin had his notebook shut. The curly-haired boy hastily jammed on his cap and followed his friend, backpack flopping back and forth. He finally caught up to Mike at the bike rack, where Lucas, Max and Will were already waiting. Mike mounted his bike.

"Wait for us," Lucas called, unlocking his own and swinging himself up onto the seat.

Max cleared her throat. "I don't know about you, but I'm not really feeling El's today," she said meaningfully. "But my dad and my brother are off touring colleges, so my house is open, if you guys want."

Dustin, Lucas, and Will chorused their agreement. Mike was silent, but that came as a surprise to nobody. After a second he raised a hand in farewell.

"Well, see you guys," he said, and started to pedal off.

"Hey, wait up!" Dustin hollered, following him.

Mike turned, blinking. "What?"

But Dustin just gave him a beaming grin and held out his hand. "Good luck, man. You'll do great."

Mike rolled his eyes, suppressing a smile, and grasped the other boy's hand firmly. "Thanks, Dustin."

Will pulled up next. "She'll say yes," he promised, smiling at Mike encouragingly. "I know she will."

Mike smiled fondly at him. "Yeah. Thanks, Byers."

Lucas was next. "You got this, bro." He slapped his friend on the shoulder bracingly, and this time Mike couldn't withhold the eye-roll.

"Jesus, why is everyone acting like I'm about to go fight a war or something?" he groaned, failing to realize that his own thoughts had been equally dramatic for the past several hours. The others laughed. After a moment, Mike did, too. Then he turned to the one person who had remained silent.

"Well, what about you, Max?" he said. "Want to tell me how great I'll do, too?"

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Just don't think this gives you any PDA rights, Wheeler. If I have to watch you two making out for the rest of the year, I'm going to puke." With that, she hopped onto her skateboard and pumped her leg out hard, sending her rolling down the hill. With waves and last bids of good luck, all of the boys but Mike followed her. He watched them go for a moment before pedaling off in the other direction.

Eleven stared out the living room window sadly. She checked the clock. 3:16. Mike would have just gotten out of school. It usually took him a little under thirty minutes to get here, meaning that he'd be here in about fifteen minutes. That is, if he was coming at all, which El wasn't certain he would be.

Her eyes filled with tears. She shouldn't have made him leave. It wasn't his fault if he didn't like her, was it? It was hers. She wasn't

good enough for him. Wasn't smart enough, wasn't pretty enough. After all, Mike was... Mike was *Mike*. How could *anyone* be good enough for him? Least of all her? Surely the best thing she could do would be to be grateful to for her friendship with him, be grateful for the kiss she had shared with him a year ago, and move on. Just like he clearly had.

But El couldn't bring herself to. Her entire life she had never been given what she wanted. For twelve years she lived in a lab, an experiment to be gawked at and taken notes on, poked and prodded, shouted at. She would be given a cookie or a potted plant for her room when she was good, as if such meaningless rewards were actually meant to appease her. Finally she had met Mike and his friends and for a glorious week, she had *belonged*. Then the bad men had taken that away from her until, in Hopper, she got a family and a home. But even he had made her wait three-hundred and fifty-three long, torturous days to see Mike again. And she *had* waited, hadn't she? Not happily, but she had.

El wasn't going to let Mike slip through her fingers. Not now. Not again. Not that easily. This time, she was going to fight for what she wanted.

But what could she *do*?

Eleven had no idea how to handle complex social matters like this. She was, generally, fairly blunt when it came to asking for what she wanted. But with Mike... what could she say? Was she suppose to beg? Be patient and hope his feelings of friendship grew into the same love she bore him? Surely not. No, what she needed was someone who had gone — or better yet, was currently going through — something similar. Someone who would understand. A girl, preferably.

And then the answer came to her so suddenly, so simply, so *perfectly*, that she gasped out loud.

El ran to her room and began to root around on her desk, sweeping things aside left and right. After a minute of searching, she had made a fair mess of the place, but she found what she was looking for: a slip of paper with the phone numbers of each member of the party.

They had given them to her after finding out, to their disappointment, that Hopper's cabin was far out of range of their walkie-talkies.

She snatched it up and bolted back into the living room, where she wrenched the phone off the wall. She began to punch in digits, biting her lip in concentration as she read one specific number off the paper. Then she held the phone up to her face and waited. After several seconds, she got a response. It started with a brief flare of static, but turned into a voice.

"—san Mayfield speaking."

"Max?" El asked.

"Hi, this is her mother, Susan. Who is this?" came the muffled reply, the tone becoming more gentle as the speaker realized she was talking to a young girl.

El frowned, unsure of how to proceed. "Want to talk to Max," she said after a brief pause.

"Do you know her from school, sweetie?"

"Yes," El told the voice, because it was easier than explaining the actual answer.

"Okay, one second. She just walked in the door with some friends." The voice grew distant, as though the woman had moved away from the mouthpiece. "Maxine! Your friend is on the line!"

"One second!" El heard a faint voice respond. Then, a moment later, there was a brief jostling sound and Max's voice took over the phone.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Me," El said.

"El?" Max's voice was sharp with surprise. El heard voices in the background, easily recognizable as the boys. Was Mike there? "Uh, hey, I wasn't expecting you to call. What's up?"

El took a deep breath. Suddenly she realized she hadn't thought this far into her plan. "I... need help."

"With Mike?"

El's eyes widened. "How did you know?"

"Intuition," Max replied dryly. "Listen, El, have you thought about just talking to him?"

"I..." As a matter of fact she had, but the idea always made her feel cripplingly nervous, like there was something big and heavy pressing on her chest. "What do I say?" she asked finally, furrowing her brow.

"Just, I don't know, the truth?" Max said. "Like, 'hey, Mike, I really like you and want to date you, what do you say?'"

El bit her lip, making an unhappy sound. She thought she could hear a couple of the boys giggling.

"What is it?" Max prompted after a moment of silence.

The pause extended for another couple seconds. Then, in a small voice, El said, "I did."

"You did?" said a stunned Max. Mike had definitely *not* mentioned that in the schoolyard earlier. She paused, taking the phone away from her mouth and turning to her friends. "Guys, go back to my room and just hang out or whatever. I'll be back in a second." She raised the mouthpiece back up. "When? What did you say?"

"I..." For a moment, El hesitated. Then, all at once, the floodgates in her throat released and Eleven recounted every detail of the previous day into the phone: Mike coming over, playing Scrabble, asking what a boyfriend was, asking if he was her boyfriend and, finally, his response. By the end, El was wiping away tears and making a conscious effort not to sob into the phone.

As soon as she finished, Max let out a long, slow sigh. "El."

"Yes?" El replied, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"I don't know why you're upset."

El paused, blinking. "No?"

"No," said Max. "Because to me, that doesn't sound like he rejected you at all."

A surge of hope shot through El's chest. "No?" she said again.

"Nope. Just sounds like Mike's an awkward idiot who's too pussy to ask you out," said Max, again with her signature dryness.

"I—" El was speechless. After several seconds, she mumbled the only thing she could think to say: "That's mean."

Max snorted with laughter. "Yeah. Sorry. I was joking. Kind of." She cleared her throat. "Point is, he didn't say no. He just got all embarrassed and tried to pretend like he doesn't want to go out with you."

"Why?" El demanded, furrowing her brow.

"Dunno," Max replied. "It's a stupid thing boys do." There was something irritable in her voice when she said that. There was another brief pause before Max continued.

"Anyway, he's completely head over heels for you," the redheaded girl told her through the phone. "He's obsessed. You're the only thing that's ever on his mind. And *everyone* knows it. It's the most obvious thing in the world."

"It is?" El said, feeling another surge of hope.

"It is," Max confirmed. "I guarantee you the only reason he didn't ask you out then and there is because he's going through the same thing as you are. You two are such nervous nellys, I don't know how you survive at all."

El gasped. "Mike... Mike thinks I don't like him?" How was that possible? He was her favorite thing in the world; more than Eggos, more than Dustin or Lucas or Max or Will, more even than Hopper. How could he not see that?

"Told you," replied Max. "Nervous nellies."

"Nervous nellies," El echoed dazedly.

"One more thing," said Max, her voice buzzing with static. "Mike's coming to your house. Like, right now."

"He is?" El's eyes widened. She instinctively started to run to the door, forgetting the wall-mounted phone was attached to a cord. It was wrenched from her fingers, falling to the ground with a loud clatter. El scrambled to pick it up, raising to her ear in time to hear the end of Max's sentence.

"—surprised he's not there by now, actually," came the girl's voice.

"I—" El started, but, as if answering Max's call, a jean-jacket-clad figure appeared from the tree-line, heading straight for the front door of the cabin. El gasped. "He is," she almost shouted into the phone. "Got to go."

On the other end, Max heard the phone being banged back into its wall-mounted holster before the line went dead. After a second, she hung up her own phone and sighed, rubbing her forehead.

The spankin'-new life and career of Maxine Mayfield, she thought sardonically. Official relationship counsellor of Indiana state. Starting at ten bucks an hour plus tip.

Max allowed herself a tired grin before heading back up to her room, where, through the cracked door, she could hear the rambunctious laughter of her friends.

I swear, if either of those two manage to fuck this up, I'll eat Dustin, she promised herself.

Tension builds! Will El and Mike stop being idiots and realize they like each other, or will Max have to kill and consume Dustin? Thanks for reading, everybody!

7. Chapter 7

Mike swallowed and took a deep, calming breath. Hopper's low-slung, homely cabin had never looked so intimidating. Somehow, even with the knowledge impressed upon him by his friends (specially Max, who claimed to be an eyewitness — earwitness? — source), he was more nervous than ever now. Rehearsing his apology to El in his head and preparing to do it in real life were entirely different things.

Get it over with, Mike told himself forcefully. He shook himself and marched up the wooden steps, stopping in front of the door. He took another deep breath and raised his hand to knock.

But before his fist even made contact with the door, it flew open. Mike jumped about thirty feet straight up, releasing a very un-masculine cry of surprise. Then, seeing who had opened the door, the surprise vaporized, turning into embarrassment at his reaction.

"Uh— hey, El," he greeted, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably. She was standing in the doorway, framed by the warm yellow light from the cabin's interior so that each individual curl and frizz in her mass of chocolate hair was turned to spun gold. She was wearing a red flannel sweater. Mike thought (as usual) that she had never looked so beautiful — or intimidating.

"Hi, Mike," she replied quietly, and Mike was half relieved and half dismayed to hear that El's tone was just as awkward as his. It was dry and tight and scratchy, as though she had just swallowed too hard. She cleared her throat loudly. There was a moment of silence that stretched on far too long. Then, both teens spoke at the same time.

"Listen, I'm really sorry about yesterday—" Mike said. "I'm sorry I made you leave," El said.

They looked at each other. There was another drawn out pause.

"I totally gave you the wrong idea—" Mike started. "Wasn't right to get angry—" El started.

They looked at each other again.

"Do you want to go inside?" Mike suggested.

El nodded several times, relieved that they had gotten *somewhere*. "Okay," she agreed readily. She turned and led the way to the living room, where she lowered herself into her favorite squashy armchair and sat in her go-to comfort position: feet tucked up behind her, head on the right armrest, hands under her cheek. It felt wrong today, however; El frowned and adjusted herself, sitting straight up and rocking back and forth nervously.

Mike sat in the wooden chair facing her. The two met each others' gazes, then looked away.

"Okay, so I messed up big time—" Mike launched into his speech, but, for a third time, spoke in the same beat as El, who said, "I was angry because I was sad but—"

They fell silent for another few seconds.

"You start," they said simultaneously. They stared at each other, then, in unison, both teens burst out laughing. It was a warm sound, a sudden, braying symphony that cut through the palpable tension in the room. Mike took a minute to compose himself, then, finally, managed to speak uninterrupted.

"Okay, *you* start," he told El, wiping tears of hilarity from his eyes.

She nodded, but still didn't speak for another minute. She was giggling hard — far too hard to get words out — and, locked in her laughter, was doubled over in her chair. Finally she quelled the giggles and took a steadying breath. All at once, all of the nervousness and trepidation came flooding back to her. Her heart started racing and her throat tightened.

"I..." El began, then stopped, staring at the floor. She could feel the now-familiar creeping of embarrassment and awkwardness and she knew her face would be turning pink. She desperately wished she could control it.

"Go on," Mike urged. "The sooner we can both say sorry, the sooner

we can be friends again."

That sentence was what did it. That line of encouragement left Mike's mouth, hit El's ears, and the soup of her pent-up frustration and awkwardness and confusion and sadness and teenage hormones just then hit the boiling point. Because maybe she was confused, maybe she was just an uneducated, awkward, lovesick and, frankly, *horny* thirteen year-old. But Eleven soon-to-be Hopper would not settle for "friends again". She took a sudden, sharp breath, and finally, all at once, the floodgate lifted in her throat.

"Max said I should talk to you when I asked her what to do because I really really like you as more than a friend like a boyfriend and when I see your face I get warm and when I am sad you make me happy and sometimes when I feel alone or bored or just don't know what to think about I think about you and—

"El—" Mike desperately tried to cut in, but now that she had gotten started, the words kept pouring out, so fast even El couldn't keep track of what she was saying.

"—and sometimes I feel like I can't even talk to you because I like you so much and I wanted to tell you but I didn't know how because I think to you I am only a friend and that's okay because it's not your fault but that makes me sad and sometimes when I'm sad I get angry so that's why yesterday I made you leave but I'm sorry—"

"Eleven!"

"—really really sorry and—"

She seemed to not even hear him. Her eyes were squeezed tight shut, the words flowing from her mouth like steam from a geyser. Mike stared at her, waiting for her to finish, but her rambling only increased in speed, the individual words becoming indiscernible. Her face matched her flannel sweater almost exactly; Mike wasn't even sure if it was from embarrassment or oxygen deprivation. At this rate she was going to talk until she passed out. So Mike did the only thing he could think to do. He leapt from his chair, grabbed the front of El's sweater, and kissed her hard on the lips.

She stopped babbling. The relentless tidal waves of words ceased all at once, the gesture stunning her into abrupt silence. Her eyes went wide as saucers. After a second, they closed, and she fell hungrily into the kiss, pushing her face up against Mike's own. One hand went to his shirt collar, drawing him closer, silently denying him the ability to pull away. As if he would dream of it.

Eventually, though, after what could've been ten seconds or ten minutes, they had to come up for air. When they did, both teens fell back, breathing hard, faces pink with a jumble of emotions. Mike collapsed back into his own chair. A moment of silence passed between them. It was one of many that had already occurred that day, but this one, unlike the others, contained not a grain of awkwardness. Both El and Mike were in a daze, and, for once, embarrassment was the last thing on either of their minds.

It was Mike who finally broke the silence. "El?" he said.

She blinked slowly, still stunned. "Yes?"

"Me too," he told her.

She blinked again. Then, as though she was realizing what had just happened for the first time, her eyes opened wide. Mike, not for the first time, reflected on how enormous and dark they were. "You too?"

"Yeah," he confirmed. He had gone a little pink again, but El noticed that, unusual for when he was blushing, her eyes were fixed on hers. "Since the beginning. Since last year. I never... never found someone new. I never gave up on you." Mike swallowed hard, suddenly finding it difficult to continue. He pushed past the lump in his throat. "And ever since you came back, I was too nervous to talk to you about it. I guess I also thought you wouldn't like me. I didn't... I didn't want to lose you again." He realized with some degree of annoyance that his voice was shaking a little.

El shook her head. "Stupid," she chided affectionately. "Of course I like you. Waited three hundred and fifty-three days to like you."

He nodded mutely.

"Mike," El said. She sat up straighter in her armchair and looked right at him. "I want to be your boyfriend."

He stared at her for a good five seconds before bursting out into gales of laughter. She stared back, hurt.

"No?" she said in a small voice, biting her lip.

Mike struggled to catch his breath guiltily. He knew very well what it felt like to have friends laugh at something dumb that you had said. "No, no, El. I mean, yes. Definitely yes."

She looked relieved for a moment, but then tilted her head in confusion. "Funny?"

Mike smiled, restraining more laughter. "*Girl*friend, El. I would be your boyfriend and you would be my *girl*friend."

"Oh." El considered this, tilting her head. "Girlfriend. That... makes sense."

"Yeah," Mike agreed.

"Mike?"

"Yeah, El?"

"Can I kiss you again?"

"I, uh—" Mike stammered. "S-sure, if you want." Then a nervous thought struck him. "Wait, do you even know what kissing is?"

El blinked. "Of course. We just kissed. And last year, after the bath. Remember?"

Oh, yes, he remembered. "Well, yeah, but I meant— you know what it, you know, means?"

She nodded. "You said boyfriends and girlfriends do *couple things*. You said kissing is a *couple thing*."

Mike chuckled nervously, unconsciously raising a hand to mess up his

midnight curls. "Y-yeah, that's the gist of it, I guess."

"So I can kiss you now?" El pressed. Her feet tapped impatiently.

"Uh... yeah. Yeah, you can."

She stood from her chair and moved to his, where she lowered herself unceremoniously into his lap.

Well, she wastes no time, Mike had time to think randomly, lost in her gorgeous eyes, before her mouth was on his.

It was a chaste, clumsy, poorly performed kiss — predictably, given that it was the first El had ever initiated. It only lasted a second before they broke apart. Mike didn't care. Her lips were pink velvet: not too dry, not too moist, just perfect, warm, and sinfully soft. They kissed again. This time it lingered, and Mike was able to detect the scent of vanilla coming off her curls. She tasted a little like vanilla, too.

A number of seconds later — like the first one, Mike wasn't quite sure how long the kiss had gone on for — the two teens broke apart. El moved her head back enough that she could look into Mike's eyes. She smiled. He smiled. She pressed her forehead against his and closed her eyes in bliss.

This. This is good. This is... this is yes. El wasn't sure if that was — what did Hopper call it? Proper grammar? Well, whatever it wasn't, it felt right, so she didn't care. She snuggled down further, pressing her face into the crook of Mike's neck. She felt his arms wrap around her shoulders and lower back, drawing her closer. He was very warm.

"I like you a lot, El," Mike whispered. There was a word he really wanted to use, a word he felt he *should* use, but he felt that maybe he was supposed to wait. Just a little bit. For her sake.

"I like you a lot too, Mike," she murmured back, her voice muffled against his neck. "More than any other person."

"Me too," Mike told her, and he was surprised to find that he was unsurprised that he meant it. He cracked a grin. That was a damn *line* right there.

Minutes passed. A thought struck Mike, and he grinned again, poking El on her back gently.

"Hey," he said. "Do you like me even more than Eggos?"

The question was, obviously, a joke, but El appeared to consider it for a second. Then she nodded seriously. "Much more than Eggos."

He smiled. If Jane "Eleven" Ives put more value on him than on Eggos, then Michael Wheeler figured he could die right then and there a happy man.

Woo! About time, right? Also, since that chapter was a little on the shorter side, I'm including a little blooper below for some cheap silliness. Thanks for reading! I'll try to get the next chapter out ASAP.

AU:

"And then I hit him so hard with the hockey stick he went *flying* down the storm drain," Dustin said. Lucas and Will cheered and clapped. Max opened her mouth to say something when the ring of the telephone cut her off.

"One sec, guys," she said, and bolted out of the room. She grabbed the phone off the wall and brought it to her ear.

"Hello?" she called into the mouthpiece.

"Max?" The voice on the other end was high and plaintive.

"Hi, El," Max greeted. "Did he come?"

"Yes," said El.

"How did it go?" Max prompted excitedly.

"Bad," El replied. "I was angry so I threw him out the door. He ran away." She sounded depressed.

"Oh, my God..." Max groaned. "El, it's not that hard to just not be a

dick. I thought you liked him."

"He made me mad."

"Guess so," said Max dryly. "Listen, just try again tomorrow, okay? Try to be a little more forgiving."

"Okay," said El. "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah," replied Max heavily. "I kind of have a promise to keep. See you." She hung up the phone and sighed, rubbing her forehead.

Well, best not delay, she thought, and headed back to her room. She opened the door.

"Hey," Lucas greeted. "Dude, listen to this joke Dustin just told me—"

"Just wait a second," Max told him. She turned to Dustin. "Listen, man, no hard feelings, okay? It's nothing personal. I just take my promises pretty seriously."

He stared at her, confusion written all over his broad face. "Max, what—"

She descended upon him in a furious blur of teeth and nails. Lucas and Will screamed, too shocked and horrified to move. Gusts of wind blew out in a tiny hurricane from the snarling, writhing, ginger-haired mass in the center of the room. Within a few seconds Dustin was completely gone and Max was sitting in the spot he had previously occupied. She nonchalantly reached up and picked a piece of bone from between her teeth.

"So, Lucas, about that joke..."

8. Chapter 8

Hey all! Sorry it's been so long since my last update. I thought that, now that I'm back into a school routine, I'd have a more consistent scheduling update, but it turns out I have a hell of a lot of stuff to make up from the days I missed. Oh well :(

Also, take note: last chapter, I included an AU blooper for comedic purposes, in which Mike's endeavor to ask El out goes less smoothly, and, based on the joking promise she made in the chapter before that one, Max has to kill and eat Dustin. Since I think I confused a couple people, I'm making it clear here: that did NOT actually happen. El didn't actually throw Mike out the door. Max is not a piranha. Dustin is still alive. It was all just a joke to make y'all laugh. So I hope I didn't scare any of you too badly.

And with that out of the way, enjoy Chapter 8!

Mike woke up the following morning with a hollow feeling in his heart. His alarm had jerked him from a wonderful dream, and he instantly wished he could go on sleeping, living that beautiful fantasy. In it, he had gone to El's house. She had been waiting for him. In a jumbled river of words she had confessed to him, telling him she liked him but was afraid he would never like her back. He had told her how much she meant to him, how much she would always mean to him. They had kissed, and she had tasted like vanilla and—

Wait. Vanilla? That was an oddly specific detail for a dream.

Mike pounded his alarm silent with a sudden, jerking gesture, and rolled out of bed, suddenly fueled by a spurt of energy. No, of course not! It hadn't been a dream at all. He had been reliving the events of the previous afternoon in his sleep — probably over and over again.

Mike felt an ear-to-ear grin spread unbidden across his face. Unable to restrain himself, he even pumped the air with one triumphant fist before fervently thanking the universe that none of his friends were

there to see the gesture.

He had done it. Or, more accurately, El had done it. But who gave a rat's ass?

Mike, I want to be your boyfriend. He burst into rolling waves of laughter at the memory. She had been so sincere. So earnest. So *El*. God, she was so perfect. And *God*, today was a Friday, so he'd be able to spend a whole weekend with her...

Boyfriend and girlfriend. Him and Eleven. It almost still felt like a dream, like the ones Mike had had every night for three hundred and fifty three days. But this would not be like one of those times, would it? Because in his dreams, there was always a bad ending. In his dreams, El had always disappeared. But no way was Mike going to let that happen this time. He would *not* let himself fuck up. Not with this.

Mike tore off his pajamas and threw on some clothes, hardly stopping to check to see if they matched. His mind was racing. He washed up, brushed his teeth, and headed downstairs to greet his family.

His mother was juggling Holly and a sizzling pan of bacon in the kitchen while Nancy, at her side, poured three mugs of coffee. His father was slurping at a glass of orange juice over a newspaper. Bright late-autumn sunlight poured in through the windows, seeming to compliment Mike's mood.

"Good morning," Mike greeted brightly, grabbing a piece of toast from the stack on the table and biting into it with a *crunch*. Instantly he was met with two pairs of wide eyes (Ted continued to read his newspaper).

"*Good morning?*" Nancy repeated.

He stared at her. "Uh... yeah?"

She exchanged a confused glance with their mother.

"What?" Mike demanded, looking between them.

"You haven't said good morning in, like, a year," Nancy said

incredulously, frowning.

Karen nodded, a look of concern on her pale face. "Is everything okay, Michael? Did something happen?"

Mike coughed, showering the table with crumbs. "What— I *literally* just said good morning. That's it. Jeez," he gasped after he settled, staring at his mother and sister in confusion.

"Hmm," was all Karen replied, giving him one last worried look before turning back to the bacon.

"Mom," Mike protested. "Seriously? Am I not allowed to be in a good mood?"

"You don't get good moods," Ted said absently, turning the page of his newspaper. He drained the last of his juice and smacked his lips.

"Thanks, dad," replied Mike dryly.

Nancy had gone silent. She was staring at him through half-lidded eyes, lips moving silently.

"What's with you?" Mike shot at her. "You look like you're trying to curse me or something."

Nancy rolled her eyes and leaned close, lowering her voice so neither of the Wheeler parents could hear. "Were you with El yesterday, by any chance?"

Mike choked on the bite of toast he had just taken. *How the fuck does she know?* "I— That's not—" he stammered. Nancy smirked. He swallowed his toast and glared at her. "We always go after school, asshole. It's not like it was any different than normal."

"Mhm," Nancy replied, a knowing smile on her face. Mike wanted to punch her.

"What's going on?" Karen called, throwing a look at the quarreling siblings.

"Nothing," they replied in unison. Karen sighed.

Mike left for school early, simply because he had worked himself into a jumpy, excited, state of giddiness and needed to bike it off. It turned out to be a poor solution; instead of burning off his abundance of energy, biking only seemed to feed it further. Twice Mike was almost flattened by morning-groggy drivers already on their way to work. On both occasions said drivers certainly got the adrenaline spike needed to wake them up. They had to swerve, horns blaring angrily, to avoid the lean, coal-haired boy speeding down the road, legs working the pedals so fast they were turned to vague blurs.

Mike dismounted, chaining his bike to the rack, and shook his arms, trying in vain to knock off some of the energy. In his distracted state, he didn't notice his friends approaching until Dustin leapt onto his back from behind, scaring the living daylight out of him in the process.

"JESUS FUCK!" Mike roared in shock, staggering and whipping around. He identified the culprit and relaxed a little, sighing. "Christ, Dustin, don't *do* that, man. I almost pissed myself."

Dustin himself collapsed into the dirt with laughter, echoed by Lucas and Max. Will looked more sympathetic.

"Yeah, yeah," Mike muttered, grinning despite himself. His mood was too good to be ruined by Dustin's antics.

"So, spit it out, Wheeler," Lucas said, punching his shoulder. "How'd it go?"

Mike feigned ignorance, looking away to finish chaining up his bike. "How'd what go?"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Uh, El? Did you ask her out?" The others leaned forward, eager to hear Mike's response.

"Uh... yeah," he replied, ears red. "She said yes, so I guess now we're —"

He was cut off by a chorus of cheers. Several passing kids gave the whooping group looks ranging from annoyed to confused to alarmed.

"YEAH, MIKE!" bellowed Dustin far too loudly, pounding his friend on the back. Mike was not the only one puberty had hit hard — Dustin had grown broader at the same rate as Mike had grown taller. He would, one day, be armed with an easy two-hundred pounds of solid, reliable genetic muscle. At thirteen, he was not quite there, but he was already built like a truck and his congratulatory back-slaps drove Mike, wheezing, to his knees in the dry dirt.

Lucas stepped up and hoisted Mike to his feet, gripping his elbow and shoulder bracingly. "Good job, bro," he said seriously. He squeezed Mike's forearm and stepped aside to let Will through.

"Yeah, congratulations," the small Byers boy said warmly. "Even before I met El I knew how you felt about her. Just from the look you'd get when you talk about her. So I'm really glad, man. I'm really happy for you."

Will had that way of speaking so earnestly, so sincerely, so purely from the heart that Mike almost forgot about the dull ache Dustin had inflicted upon his poor back. It would be several years from that day before Mike would be able to put his finger on why exactly Will's honesty always touched him so deeply: it was because, in a way, it reminded Mike of El. But even without that knowledge, the small boy's words left him feeling bizarrely emotional.

"I..." Mike swallowed. "Yeah, thanks, Will."

"What, but not us?" Dustin demanded indignantly.

Mike straightened, wincing. "I think you just broke something in my back. So not, not you."

Max, who had so far been silent, snorted with laughter. "Take note, Dustin," she said. "Mike's a bitch."

Mike gave her the finger. There would have been a time — a time in the fairly recent past, actually — where he would have taken offense to her words. But after being Max's friend for a month or so, you eventually learned to take her insults in stride. She wasn't so different than Dustin or Lucas in that respect.

They walked as a group up to the school building, bantering, bickering, and joking all the while. Mike found that he was the brunt of most of these jokes ("So, when you two start selling child porn tapes on the black market, can we split the proceeds?"), but, simultaneously, found himself unbothered. It would just about take another Upside Down hell-beast to dampen his good mood right now.

Or another long, grueling school day. You know, for a change.

It seemed to be a rapidly growing tradition for Mike to sprint out the front doors of the school the second the final bell rang. For what felt like the fourth or fifth time that week, Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Will followed him, nearly tripping over their own feet in a desperate effort to keep up. As usual, they caught up with him at the bike rack. As soon as he made sure they were all there, Mike led the way down the hill, wind blowing back his mass of curls. Lucas followed directly behind him, with Dustin on his left and Will and Max bringing up the rear. Together, the quintet formed a loose arrowhead formation as they raced down the road at a pace bordering on breakneck. Keeping up that speed, it took them shorter than usual to reach Hopper's house. When they did they abandoned their bikes (and skateboard) at the tree-line and approached the low-slung cabin. They approached, racing up the wooden steps.

Mike, who was in front of the line, thumped on the door, then stepped back. His heart was pumping in a new, funny way. Sure, it knocking on El's door always got his pulse up a little (a lot), but this was different. Somehow, the knowledge that Eleven was, as of yesterday, now his *girlfriend* made the prospect of seeing her again all the more exciting — and terrifying. He shuffled his feet anxiously. Dustin, standing behind him, noticed and placed a steadying hand on his shoulder. Mike gave him a small, grateful smile before the door opened. He looked up in time to catch a swirl of thick chocolate curls, huge brown eyes, and creamy skin before El's lips were on his.

She had to push herself high onto her tip-toes to kiss him; Mike was so much *taller* than her now. But once she made contact she kept it, her face pushed into Mike's really too hard, but neither of them cared much. Both teens relished in each other's scents, tastes, warm, soft lips, forgetting in that moment the four others present...

...until those four others released a protesting chorus of groans.

"Guys! What the fuck!" Lucas exclaimed, averting his eyes.

"Woah—!" was all Will could manage before he flushed bright scarlet and turned away.

"*Ugh*, knock it off, you sickos!" Max shouted.

"I'll do the camera work if you guys promise me twenty percent of the profits!" Dustin yelled, jumping up and down in excitement.

All that, bellowed in perfect synchronization, jerked El and Mike from their moment. They broke apart, Mike red-faced, El seemingly unperturbed. Now that they were boyfriend and girlfriend, she felt no need for embarrassment. That's what couples did, right? Kissed?

She looked at the others indignantly. Maybe Mike hadn't told them yet. "We're boyfriends now," she proclaimed, then corrected herself. "Boyfriend and *girl*friend."

"Yeah, we, uh, could tell," Lucas choked, looking between the two with a curled lip, as though he had just bit into something sour. "Maybe just try to keep the PDA to a minimum?"

"Seconded," Max muttered, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Unless you're interested in selling child porn on the black market, which I've heard can net you some serious dough, and—"

"Dustin, shut up," said Lucas, Max, and Mike in unison. The three exchanged glances.

"Okay, okay," he surrendered, holding up his hands. "Just saying. If you're ever broke, Harry Romero told me it's a really lucrative business because some creeps will pay out their ass for that stuff—"

"El, do you want to go out today?" Mike cut across him, addressing Eleven. She nodded excitedly. "Okay, go get some warm clothing," he told her. "It's kind of chilly out, and I don't want you to get cold."

"Okay," she replied, beaming up at him with adoration sparkling in

her eyes. Lucas and Max exchanged a disgusted glance. Dustin nudged Will and the two grinned knowingly as El turned back inside the house, heading out of sight to retrieve a jacket. Mike's dopey gaze followed her until, with nobody to hold it open, the front door swung shut. As soon as it did, Dustin reclined on the wooden rail of the stairs, grinning.

"Ah, to be young and in love," he joked in a raspy old-man's voice.

"Oh, shut up," Mike told him, rolling his eyes.

"As long as you keep that lovey-dovey shit away from me," Max spoke up. "I think I puked in my mouth a little bit just now."

"Come on, they just kissed," Will protested, though he, too, had been decidedly uncomfortable in the moment of it. The others looked at him in surprise. "Let 'em have that. They waited, like, a year for this."

Mike smiled gratefully, then blushed and looked at his feet. "Man," he mumbled. "A year. I still can't believe you guys all knew."

Lucas snorted. "I can't believe you *didn't* know we knew. I mean, it's not like you tried to hide it."

"I did too!" Mike protested, unsure whether or not he was being completely honest.

Lucas raised an eyebrow. It was an expression he was growing increasingly fond of. "Yeah, well, El didn't, that's for sure."

"She didn't?" Mike looked from Lucas to Dustin to Max to Will with despair in his eyes.

Max sniggered. "No way. I don't know how you didn't realize. You're hopeless." She seemed to relish in his apparent inferiority. Mike glared at her.

"Seriously, you're all she talks about when you're not there," Lucas told him.

"Yeah, remember the day you had to stay after school to do that makeup test?" added Dustin. "She was so bummed, dude. It was just,

'where's Mike? What time is Mike coming? Mike-Mike-Mike-Mike-Mike—"

The others started to join in — first Max, then Will and Lucas, adding to the rapidly growing chorus of "Mike-Mike-Mike".

"Okay, enough, I get it!" Mike shouted, red-faced but grinning now despite himself.

"Mike-Mike-Mike—"

"Guys! Cut it out!"

"Mike-Mike-Mike—"

"GUYS—"

"Mike-Mike—"

"Mike?"

The group fell silent as the door opened, and Eleven stepped through the gap, blinking in the sudden bright November sun.

"Why are we Miking?" she asked curiously. She was now outfitted in a puffy dark-blue down coat, a fuchsia scarf and an oversized floppy wool hat. Her mid-length brown hair fell out of it, framing her head in a stylelessly-stylish tumble of waves and curls. Mike thought she looked exquisite.

"Yeah, guys, why *are* we Miking?" Dustin said, grinning slyly.

Mike glared at him. *Shut up!* he mouthed furiously. Dustin's grin widened and Mike looked away.

"Are we ready to go, then?" he asked loudly in an effort to change the subject. "We could just hang around in the woods for awhile, if that works for all of you?"

"Yes," said El, looking up at the pale gray sky. Watery sunlight filtered through the thin film of clouds and coated her face in yellow-white light. The others chorused their agreement and the group

shuffled down the wooden stairs.

They had been outside for a little over an hour and a half when it began to snow.

At first, they had played some games like hide and seek, but after the first hour of that they got bored and ended up just hanging around, walking and talking and enjoying each other's company. By the time the snow began to drift down from the white sky like feathers from a punctured pillow, they had isolated themselves into three groups of two. Max and Lucas took up the front. Will and Dustin (who, Mike noticed guiltily, was looking at the two ahead of him with just the barest hint of dejection) took the middle. Mike and El walked together twenty or so yards behind. They hadn't quite been able to comply with Max's wishes — or rather, they hadn't tried. Both teens shared a similar view: they'd missed out on a year of kisses and it seemed they had to make up on lost time. Which they did, without much hesitation or shame. El thought she must've kissed Mike about a hundred times by the time the first snowflakes of the year fell from the canopy.

She stopped in her tracks, staring up in awe. Of course she had seen snow before, in the winter of last year. But that had been a different thing entirely. Then, snow had seemed a new monster from the Upside Down, just as trying and terrifying as the demogorgon had been. She had never seen it before, and at first she had been entranced by its pure, diamond beauty. But soon she had discovered it was *cold*, bitterly, painfully cold. No, El did not like snow much the first time around.

This time was different, though. With Mike at her side and clad in warm, well-fitting clothing, El watched with unabashed curiosity as the tiny crystalline flakes flitted down to earth. Mike turned and watched her silently, drinking in the sight of her. Her head turned up to the sky, mouth hanging open, nose, ears, and cheeks reddened with cold, Mike felt his heart might just explode right then and there. The feeling only heightened when a single snowflake alighted onto El's upturned dainty nose. She went cross-eyed, trying to track its progress, before it landed, and she let out a little squeak in surprise at the sudden cold sensation.

It was too much for Mike. He took a step forward and wrapped her up in his arms. She looked up at him, blinking, surprised but clearly happy with this turn of events.

"Mike?"

"I really, really like you, El," he murmured into her big floppy hat. "A lot. A lot a lot a lot."

She beamed and pressed her face into his scarf. "I like you too," she told him. "A lot a lot a lot a lot. A lotter."

Mike snorted with laughter. "A lotter?"

El nodded, frowning. "Not a word?"

"No."

She contemplated this for a second. "But if something is more, you add 'er'?"

Mike shrugged. El liked the sensation of his shoulders moving against her. It felt funny. "Yeah, usually," he said. "But sometimes you don't. English is weird."

"Oh." El bit her lip. "That's stupid."

"It's pretty stupid," Mike agreed. "I like a lotter, though. Maybe it should be added to the language."

"Yes." El nodded seriously.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Dustin called. Mike released El quickly and turned. Somehow, neither of them had heard Dustin and Will walking over to them, closing the twenty-yard gap. Will was smiling apologetically.

"I'm sure the contemplation of contemporary linguistics is a fascinating subject," Dustin began pointedly, "but while you two are trying to pull a Shakespeare and add words to the dictionary, the other newlyweds up there are escaping." He jerked a thumb vaguely over his shoulder. Mike peered, squinting, and made out the distant forms of Lucas and Max through the trees. They were apparently so

engrossed in conversation that neither had noticed that they had left their friends behind. Or maybe they just didn't care.

El stared at Dustin, wide-eyed, head tilted to one side. She hadn't understood a word of his statement. Will noticed and rushed to her aid.

"He just means Lucas and Max are leaving us behind," he told her helpfully, and she nodded, grateful.

The four began to walk, paces heightened in order to catch up. Mike extended a hand and El took it, smiling. Dustin caught the gesture out of the corner of his eye and opened his mouth. Mike turned to him and extended a finger.

"Say one word about child porn and its profits, man. I dare you," he warned.

Dustin grinned innocently, holding up his gloved hands. "I had no such intent."

Mike suppressed a sigh and shook his head. He could tell that was a joke that wasn't going anywhere any time in the near future. Oh well. He supposed he'd have to get used to it.

He felt El's hand, small but gloriously warm in his own, and his heart swelled. Some things were worth being the butt of a joke for.

Thanks for reading! As always please drop a review if you enjoyed this chapter or if there's anything else you'd like to say. Cheers!

9. Chapter 9

By the time the group got back to El's house, the sky was completely dark. They were pushing narrowly on their time constraint; it was nearly eight (though their watches all displayed something slightly different, so it was hard to say what time it was exactly). They managed to make it back with somewhere around a quarter hour to spare, though. Cold, tired, but satisfied with a fun afternoon and excited with the prospect of the upcoming weekend, the group trudged up the stairs of Hopper's cabin. They opened the door and filed inside, sighing in relief as they were, one-by-one, bathed in yellow light and lovely, lovely warmth.

They pulled off their coats and plopped themselves onto couches and armchairs. For the next fifteen or so minutes, they hung around and just talked, basking in each other's company, exchanging easy, good-natured insults and jokes. Eventually, they ended up in El's room, squeezed together on her bed or lining the carpeted floor. A few minutes in, Hopper came home from work. He called an experimental greeting and heard it chorused back from six different voices. He sighed, shaking his head, and headed to the kitchen.

The party remained in El's room. Their discussion had recently moved to the topic of scariest animals. Max had argued fiercely with Lucas about sharks. She claimed that, being a born-and-bred product of Cali, she could say firsthand that they weren't so bad, as long as they didn't think you were a seal.

"Yeah," Lucas replied. "But what if it *does* think you're a seal?"

"Guys," Dustin cut in. "You're thinking too big. Sure, sharks can be scary, but kind of cute, too, you know?"

"Um... no," said Will, staring at him.

"Well, that's your opinion." Dustin stuck his tongue out. "But what about lampreys?"

"Lampreys?" Max repeated blankly.

"Uh, yeah, lampreys?" Dustin said incredulously, as though shocked she had never heard the word. "You don't know what they are?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please enlighten me, Henderson."

"Don't be an ass, Dustin," Lucas said, glancing at Max. She rolled her eyes again, but Mike, observing her closely, thought he saw the hint of a smile cross her face.

"Okay, jeez," Dustin muttered. "Lampreys are like leeches, only they're *fish*. And they're long like ribbons and have these circular sawtooth mouths and big eyes and they're *disgusting*." He gave a theatrical shiver.

El stared at him, brow creasing in horror. She had learned of leeches in a novel Hopper had read to her about a team of soldiers that got lost in the jungles of some place called Veet-nom, or something like that. They had had to cross a shallow river, and when they came out, they were covered in leeches. The novel went into graphic and wholly unnecessary detail when describing the smooth appearance of their shiny black bodies, and the rivulets of blood that streamed from the wounds their evil little mouths left. El had pulled up the blankets to her chin, lips curled in disgust, for the entirety of the scene. For the whole following week she had been hesitant to take baths, worried that leeches might crawl out of the drain and latch onto her, burrowing into her soft skin with those creepy little razor teeth. It took much convincing from Hopper — and detail explanation as to how drains worked — to finally get El to accept that she would not be eaten alive if she closed her eyes for too long in the tub.

"Lampreys are bad," she agreed, voice breaking as her throat suddenly became dry. She cleared it roughly (though to Mike, the sound was still endearingly light and feminine) and shook herself, trying to get the image of evil little ribbony leech-fish out of her mind.

It was then that Hopper poked his head through the cracked door, bearing his customary frown.

"It's about time you kids were leaving," he said gruffly. "I know it's a weekend tomorrow, but it's past eight-thirty." He had the faintest

apologetic note in his voice; it was as much sympathy as Hopper ever seemed to express — outwardly, at least.

"Okay," they chorused back to him, and stood one-by-one, stretching and pulling on coats, scarves and hats. El, meanwhile, stayed seated on the bed, her face falling sadly.

Mike noticed and put a hand on the top of her head. She looked up at him with huge sad eyes. "It's okay," he told her gently. He felt himself go weak at the knees; those eyes were enormous, doe-brown and oh-so-beautiful. "We'll be over early tomorrow, okay?" he promised. "And then we have the whole weekend together."

El made a despondent sound. "I wish you could stay."

Mike smiled at her. "Yeah, me too."

This caused El to suddenly look away from him, frowning as though an idea had struck her.

"El?" he inquired.

She looked back at him and blinked. "Maybe if I ask..."

"I don't think Hopper'd let me," he told her regretfully. "But it's only one night. I'll be over as soon as I wake up tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"Of course. Promise."

El sighed and stood from the bed, following Mike into the living room, where the others had assembled by the front door.

"Hey, kid!" Hopper appeared from the kitchen. "Say bye to your friends and then come eat. I got us chicken pot pies."

"Bye, El," Max said, and opened the door. She stepped outside as cold air gusted into the house.

"See you tomorrow." Dustin and Lucas filed out. Will waved cheerfully and followed, holding the door for Mike.

El was silent. A brief internal struggle raged within her for a few seconds, written clearly on her face, before her mouth compulsively opened.

"Can Mike stay?" she asked, turning toward the kitchen.

Hopper turned, behind the kitchen counter, and frowned at her. "No." He started to turn back, but El protested.

"But why?" she whined.

"You know the rules, kid. Nobody stays over." *Especially not boys*, Hopper added silently. *Especially not that boy*. "You'll see your friends tomorrow."

El's eyebrows contracted, and she put her hands on her jean-clad hips, looking for all the world like a totally normal, sassy — and angry — teenage girl.

"But Mike is my boyfriend," she declared, nose in the air.

Hopper stopped dead, then, very slowly, turned to face her.

"Oh, *shiiii*—" Mike breathed, exchanging a terrified glance with his friends, who all stood wide-eyed in the doorway.

"He's what?" Hopper said softly.

"Uh, I think I need to be home," Dustin announced loudly, and backed out as quickly as possible without falling down the stairs.

"Yeah, me too," said Lucas, jumping at the opportunity. Max and Will both mumbled agreement and followed him. Mike's eyes tracked them out.

"Uh, yeah, I think I need to leave as well—" he tried to say, but El, without even sparing a glance in his direction, pistoning her arm toward him and extending a halting finger.

"No, you don't," she said. Her glare stayed fixed on Hopper.

"He's your boyfriend?" the chief repeated, looking between the two

teens — one proud-faced and defiant, the other red and scared as a mouse.

"Yes," El proclaimed. "I asked him yesterday. So now you *can't* make him leave."

"Actually, I can," Hopper replied dryly. "Fathers have more authority than boyfriends."

El sniffed. "You're not my father," she pointed out.

Hopper recoiled, feeling as though he had been struck. Logically, he knew she didn't mean for the words to carry as much brutal impact as they did. El was angry, but not *that* angry — she just didn't understand the psychological weight that the simple statement carried. Even so, a wide chasm opened up in Hopper's heart. He couldn't hold El's gaze, and looked briefly at the floor.

She leapt into the gap his silence left. "*Why* can't he stay?"

Hopper glanced at Mike, who looked right back at him, and knew at once that Wheeler understood exactly why it was forbidden. But how were they supposed to explain that to El? Have the fabled "talk" with her, right here and now?

"Because I said no," he said instead. "And that's final."

That hadn't worked. El's eyes narrowed and her jaw adopted a rigid set. *Now* she was seriously pissed, and Hopper closed his eyes briefly, realizing he had fucked up.

"That," El said, voice trembling. "Is not a *why*."

Explanation, Hopper almost said out loud, purely on instinct. *That's not an explanation, El*. He sighed. "Okay," he told her. "It's because... because..." He suddenly realized that he *had* no real explanation, other than the simple fact that he was now, whatever she might say, her father, and felt responsible for her. But Jim Hopper would be damned if he let his daughter start screwing around before she was even fourteen. Hell, how old had he been? Fifteen, wasn't it? Even that was too young. And at any rate, Hop knew that he was the last person who could be considered to exhibit role-model behavior —

especially, God knew, as a teenager.

But El looked triumphant. "You have no why," she crowed, flashing a crooked-toothed grin. Hopper glared at her.

"Listen, kid," he said, heaving a sigh. "The thing is—"

"I could tell my parents I'm sleeping over at Will's," Mike spoke up suddenly. Both El and Hopper turned to look at him. "I know he'd cover for me. And Joyce would too, if Will explained the situation."

Hopper looked doubtful, chewing the ends of his mustache.

"And we could sleep in separate rooms," Mike added, sensing weakness. El was looking between the two, wide-eyed with excitement, detecting Hopper's slowly draining resolve. "I could take the couch, or—"

"You will *not* take the couch," Hopper cut in. "I sleep there sometimes and I won't have you contaminating it with your teenager stink, you hear me? There's a guest room off the living room. Bed's a little ratty but it'll have to do."

Mike's eyes widened. He exchanged a glance with El, who met his gaze with eyes stretched wide in a too-good-to-be-true expression. "So you mean—"

"Yeah. I'm getting soft, and damn if you kids aren't stubborn," Hopper grumbled, running a weary hand through his hair. "Take the guest room. Just don't expect this to be a regular occurrence, you hear me, Wheeler? I'm doing you a favor because I'm too tired for this crap."

Mike nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, okay! Thanks a lot, chief!"

Hopper rolled his eyes, rubbing the bristly hairs on his chin and neck. He needed to shave. "Yeah, yeah. Don't be getting sappy on me, now," he grumbled. "You got clothes? Toothbrush?"

Mike's frowned. He hadn't thought of that. "Uh... no."

"He can use mine," El suggested, but Hopper shook his head.

"He's twice your size," he pointed out bluntly. "And I won't have you sharing a toothbrush. It's unhygienic." *Though God knows how much saliva they're probably sharing anyway.* Hopper winced, shoving the thought aside. It was not a pleasant image.

"I can bike home and pick up some stuff," Mike said, though he clearly wasn't keen on the idea. "It'll take me a little while, but—"

"It's cold," El objected, frowning at him worriedly.

Mike shrugged. "I'll survive," he told her.

"No, I'll drive you," Hopper said, and both teens looked at him, surprised. He scowled. "I'm not doing you a favor, Wheeler, believe me. I just want to have a private talk with you where you can't run away on me."

Mike gulped. "O-okay."

"Go wait by the car. I'll be out in a minute."

Mike nodded. El looked at him with dark anxious eyes and he shrugged helplessly, giving her hand a discreet squeeze before opening the door and heading out into the chilly evening.

Hopper, heaving a sigh, headed to his bedroom, where he quickly removed his rumpled beige uniform and redressed in warmer clothing. He pulled on a worn wool coat, shoved his keys into his pocket, and made to leave, but the front door was blocked by El, who locked eyes with him.

"Don't hurt him," she pleaded, though her gaze stayed on his.

"Hurt?" Hopper repeated incredulously. "Jesus, kid, I want to talk with him, not kill him and throw his body in a ditch."

El bit her lip. "Promise?"

"Yeah, promise." Hopper leaned forward to ruffle her curly hair. "I won't hurt your... your boyfriend, okay?" *Though I can't say I won't scare him a little,* he thought grimly.

"Okay." El stepped aside, clearing the way to the door.

"We'll be back in half an hour," Hopper told her. "Maybe forty minutes. Don't open—"

"—the door for anyone who isn't you," El finished, and cracked a small smile. Hopper tried to suppress a smile of his own, but it broke free and he leaned forward to ruffle her hair once again.

"You got it," he said, and exited the warm cabin. The door thudded shut behind him.

Hopper made his way to his car. Mike was waiting beside it, fidgeting restlessly. Hopper wordlessly opened the door to the driver's seat and climbed in. Mike made to open the door to the back, but the chief indicated the passenger seat beside him, and, surprised, the black-haired teen nodded. Once Mike had fastened his seatbelt, Hopper revved up the engine. A low, steady growl filled the vehicle, fading to a low drone as they started moving.

The first ten minutes of the drive passed without dialogue. The only sounds were the gentle rumble of the engine and soft jazz playing from the speaker. The music was light and calming and contrasted starkly with Mike's mood right now. His heart was racing and he kept stealing glances at Hopper, who stared stoically out the windshield. What did the chief want to say to him? Would he refuse Mike permission to date his daughter? No, surely not, otherwise why would he let Mike stay over?

Or... oh, hell, was Hopper going to give him *the talk*? Mike thought he would probably die of embarrassment if he had to have that conversation with the Hawkins chief-of-police.

Suddenly Hopper raised a massive hand and roughly pressed a button on the radio. The music stopped, leaving them in silence.

Oh, shit, Mike had time to think before the chief started to talk.

"Look, kid, I'm going to cut the bullshit before it even starts, okay?" he said gruffly, not taking his gaze away from the front window.

"Uh..."

"Meaning I'm not going to ask what your intentions are for dating my daughter, blah blah blah." Mike glanced at Hopper curiously when he said the words 'my daughter', but the chief appeared not to notice. "Because," he continued. "If I thought your intentions were anything... anything *normal*, I wouldn't be allowing this."

"Normal?" Mike repeated, frowning in confusion.

"Yeah, normal," Hopper replied. "Normal for kids your age. Sex and drama and all that bullshit."

Mike blushed indignantly. "I'm am *not* dating her for *sex and drama!*" he protested. "I—"

"Yeah, kid, I know," Hopper growled. "Are you listening to me? I just said that if I thought that's all you were after, I'd throw your ass on the grass so hard you shit green for the next month."

"Right," Mike mumbled, receding back into his seat. "Sorry."

"Though I'm guessing you aren't totally innocent of that," Hopper commented, finally shifting his gaze to throw Mike a sidelong glance.

Mike's blush, which had just vanished, returned in full. "Of what?"

"Cut the crap, Wheeler." Hopper rolled his eyes tiredly. "Sex."

"No! I— I wouldn't—"

"Oh, spare me," Hopper heaved a sigh. Sometimes with these kids, a little bit of intimidation felt more like brutal torture. It almost made a guy feel a little guilty. Almost. "Listen. You think I was any different at your age? Hell, I was twice as bad. I get it, kid. You're, what, fifteen?"

"Thirteen," Mike mumbled.

"Okay, thirteen." Maybe that was a *little* young, Hopper conceded. But his point remained. "You're thirteen, and yeah, El's a beautiful girl who's becoming a beautiful woman, and there are hormones and puberty all that shit that you probably know more about than I do."

Mike nodded silently.

"Point is," said Hopper, making a wide left turn. "You can't help interest, but you can show restraint and self-control. God knows where she got it from, but El has a rebellious streak ten miles wide and if I tell her not to do something, she'll do everything in her power to go ahead and do it. So I'm expecting you to be the responsible one here."

Mike nodded several times. "Yeah. Yeah, of course. You can count on me."

"I hope so." Hopper turned his stoic gaze away from the road and looked Mike dead in the eyes. "Because if I have to schedule any unexpected visits to the gyno any time in the near future, or if El lets something slip, you're the one who gets his ass beat. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir!" Mike managed to get out, expression stuck somewhere between embarrassed, repulsed, and terrified. His back was rigidly straight against the soft leather of the seat cushion.

Hopper held his gaze for a few more seconds, then dropped it, turning back to the road. "Good."

For a moment, it seemed like the conversation was over. Hopper was preparing to turn the music back on when the kid started to talk again.

"I would never do that to her, you know," he said earnestly.

"Hmm?"

"You know, anything she isn't comfortable with. Or anything she isn't ready for, even if she thinks she is."

Hopper suppressed an eye roll. "Good to hear that, kid," he said, but Mike wasn't done.

"El and I have a really special connection," he continued, and this time Hopper didn't even try. He rolled his head back on his shoulders and stared up at the ceiling of his car. Somehow, Mike didn't even notice. "We're really not like most couples. I mean, most couples our

age, anyway," he added quickly, feeling for some reason that Hopper might take offense. "We understand each other. I really lo—"

Mike's voice died in his throat, and Hopper threw him a quick glance. Neither of them said anything, but both knew exactly what word had almost left Mike's mouth. Hopper almost scoffed, but then furrowed his brow, considering.

Jim Hopper was many things, but a romantic man was not one of them. He did not believe, and never had, that love was the mythical, all-conquering, almost unachievable thing it was so often made out to be. True, it sure as hell didn't come easily to him, but he was realistic enough to admit that that was because he was one grouchy son-of-a-bitch, not because of the magical qualities of love or whatever the middle-school girls talked about these days. Maybe love was special, maybe it wasn't, but at its core, it was really just strong, strong affection, affection so deep and binding that it rendered a person all at once idiotic and ingenious, distrusting and affable, fragile as glass and strong as a lion.

And what was wrong with the fact that his daughter and the Wheeler kid felt such strong affection for each other? Sure, maybe they'd only known each other for a year, and sure, maybe they were only in contact with each other for a month of that (Hopper still felt an uncharacteristic twinge of guilt when he thought about that). But they'd already been through as much shit as most lifetime couples, hadn't they? More, even, depending on how you decided to measure up monster-fighting and running from the government with cheating, arguments, and long years of boredom. It didn't take a genius to see how comfortable Mike and El were together; not just as friends and not even as a couple, but as two human beings who had each other's backs, who'd helped each other, fought for each other, *saved* each other, who would, without a trace of doubt, die for each other. And what was love, if not that?

So maybe — just maybe — Hopper was being a little tough on the kids. Maybe they deserved a chance to be just that: kids; kids who wrestle and joke and laugh and do stupid shit and hug and kiss and fall in love.

Not that he'd ever suggest anything of the sort to Mike. Rationally, he

had figured Wheeler and El would end up going out eventually, and probably sooner rather than later. Yet to explicitly give his approval without at least making the kid prove himself felt... wrong, somehow. As though he'd never learned his lesson from all those early teenage years of messing around and, in hindsight, making a general fool of himself.

It was because of this almost embarrassed hesitation on Hopper's end that the rest of the drive passed in silence, being broken only at one point where Mike told Hopper his exact address. It wasn't too much longer at this point; after a little over five minutes they turned onto the street occupied by the Wheeler house. Mike had a sudden thought, and spoke up.

"Maybe we should stop here and I'll walk the rest of the way?" he suggested.

Hopper looked at him inquiringly. "Why?"

"If my family sees your car, they won't believe I'm going to Will's," Mike pointed out. "And then they'll get suspicious. Seems smarter not to risk it."

Hopper nodded. "Good thinking," he said, and Mike felt unexpectedly gratified at the minor praise. The chief frowned suddenly. "Your folks don't know about El, do they?"

"No," Mike said, shaking his head. "Only Nancy. The lab guys came asking after her after that first week, but they never said who she was. I think my parents assume she's Russian."

"And you never told them?"

"No."

"Good. Don't," Hopper told him bluntly. "Not until the dust is settled and El's allowed to be a human being again. And even then, I wouldn't tell them the full story."

"I know," Mike replied. "My parents... wouldn't understand, I think. Especially my dad." There was an edge of bitterness in his voice, and Hopper looked at him, suddenly feeling a flash of sympathy. Growing

up with Ted Wheeler as a dad couldn't have been easy, he realized. Especially with the way it turned out: father and son were practically opposites.

He lay a massive hand on Mike's shoulder. It was an unexpectedly empathetic gesture that took Mike by surprise. He looked at the hand, then at its owner, blinking.

"Go pick up your stuff," Hopper told him, clapping the kid on the same shoulder. "I'll wait for you back here."

"Okay," Mike said, nodding. He opened the car door and jumped out, trotting off down the dark suburban street. Hopper watched his receding form.

Gotta admit, El, he thought wryly, scratching his nose. *You could do a hell of a lot worse for yourself.* Hopper sighed, half amused and half annoyed with himself. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Weren't dads supposed to hate their daughter's boyfriends?

This chapter was a lot of fun to write. I love writing protective dad Hopper and especially sassy teenage Eleven. It just feels so humanizing - she's such a lovely and good-hearted person, sometimes it's easy to forget that she's just a thirteen-year-old girl who can, like everyone at that age, be a bit of a bitch. It really drives home how lovable a character she is for me. Hopefully it carries over to reading, too!

Thanks for reading and hope you enjoyed! See you all next update.

10. Chapter 10

Convincing Karen and Ted Wheeler that Mike wanted to spend the night at the Byers' was a breeze. Mike first discreetly radioed Will to make sure that he had told his mom the plan. Will assured him that yes, he had, and Joyce understood completely and would affirm the story if Mike's parents called. It turned out to be a wholly unnecessary precaution, though. Mike's mom agreed readily once Mike told her what he intended to do; after all, it wasn't as though sleepovers with his friends were infrequent. Ted took even less effort; he just mumbled a vague affirmative when his wife checked with him, and continued watching whatever game was currently on TV. Mike had bolted downstairs, emptied out his backpack, thrown in a change of clothes and a toothbrush, called goodbye to his parents, wrenched open the front door and ran out into the night. The whole process had taken less than ten minutes.

He shouldered his bag and made his way down the dark street to Hopper's car, which sat around the curb, engine rumbling. He mumbled a greeting that was only a little bit awkward before throwing his bag in the back and climbing into his seat.

The drive back to Hopper's was far less tense than the one to the Wheeler house. It passed mostly in silence, but, now that Mike wasn't waiting for the chief to put a bullet between his eyes, it wasn't the chest-tightening, adrenaline-pumping silence the last one had been. The same jazz played softly from the beat up radio, and Mike stared out the window at the trees, barely visible in the dark, as they raced by.

When they pulled up outside the cabin, Hopper killed the engine and Mike opened the car door, leading the way to the front. He knocked hard.

"It's us, El!" he shouted. Mike heard running footsteps and the door opened. El's heart-shaped face, framed by her familiar mop of curls, appeared. She immediately began to look him up and down anxiously, eyes huge and staring. After a few seconds, she appeared to be satisfied that Hopper had not, in fact, beaten him up, and she pulled him into a brief, tight hug.

"Missed you," she murmured into his ear before releasing him.

Mike laughed. "I wasn't even gone for an hour," he pointed out fondly.

"Still missed you," she told him. She waved cheerfully at Hopper, who was slowly ascending the porch steps, before turning back inside the house. Mike followed her.

They ate a quiet dinner that began somewhat awkwardly. At first, they had tried to squeeze together at Hopper's tiny wooden counter which was more desk than dinner table. There wasn't a whole lot of conversation but there *was* a lot of accidental physical contact. Hands brushed arms, apologies were uttered hastily, and, twice, elbows made contact with noses as they reached across the table for salt or pepper. After the second incident of this, Hopper huffed an impatient sigh and roughly pushed his chair back from the table.

"Forget it," he grumbled. "Take my chair, Wheeler. I'll eat in the kitchen."

"No, I'll do it," Mike said hastily, scrambling to stand. "Really, don't worry—"

"It's fine, kid," Hopper replied tiredly. "Sit down and eat." He grabbed the foil container and fork in one hand and his can of beer with the other, turning away from the table.

"Okay," Mike mumbled. "Uh... thanks." Feeling embarrassed and more than a little guilty, he shifted over to the seat facing El. She caught his eye and smiled at him.

He likes you, she mouthed. She took a big bite of chicken. Mike just shook his head disbelievingly and followed suit, wolfing down a little square of potato.

Mike and El helped clean up after dinner before heading off to take showers ("*One at a time*, you hear me?" came a shout from Hopper's bedroom, causing Mike to blush candy apple red). El went first while Mike helped Hopper make the bed in the guest room. It was, as promised, a little ratty and run-down, but it didn't bother Mike much.

Together, the pair threw on sheets, pillowcases, a blanket, and a thin old comforter cover. It didn't take very long, so Hopper went to wash up while Mike waited for El to come out of the shower, twiddling his thumbs aimlessly.

It was another ten minutes before she did; she apparently took long showers. The door opened and, slowly and shyly, out padded Eleven. Mike thought his heart would burst at the sight of her. She was wearing very soft-looking periwinkle-and-white pajamas, and her hair, usually an untamed mass of dark honey curls, was plastered to her head and neck. Her skin was faintly pink from the hot water, and her eyes kept flitting bashfully to her feet. In short, she was the most heartbreakingly adorable thing Mike had ever seen. In her shyness, she looked smaller (though she was diminutive to begin with) and more vulnerable, somehow, even though she was probably just about the least vulnerable person on the planet.

Jesus Christ, Mike thought. How was *he* dating this girl? Michael Wheeler, resident nerd of Hawkins, Indiana? President of AV club? Geek extraordinaire? And now... boyfriend of the most stunningly beautiful girl in the United States. It didn't seem possible, not in real life. That stuff was for movies and comic books and TV shows.

"Your turn," said the most stunningly beautiful girl in the United States.

Mike nodded and went to take a shower.

He didn't get too much time with his new girlfriend after that. It was a little past ten, which, in Hopper's eyes, was quite late. Mike and El sat on her bed, chatting away happily, reveling in each other's company. Being together so late at night was a privilege they hadn't had since the first week of their meeting, and they fully intended to make the best of it. Presently, they were lying parallel, heads close together, cheeks just barely brushing. Mike caught a whiff of vanilla from El's hair, still damp from the shower.

They talked for another fifteen or so minutes before the door open and Hopper appeared, wearing worn flannel pants and a nightshirt. Mike had to refrain from gaping; seeing the chief in pajamas was

bizarre to say the least.

"Hey, kids, bedtime," Hopper said. "And no buts. You'll see each other again in the morning."

El frowned, but she knew better than to argue again. Hopper turned away pointedly while the two teens exchanged goodnights and a chaste (but long) kiss. Mike made his way to the guest room, turned out the light, and got into bed.

At least I'll see her as soon as I wake up, he told himself. Try as he might, though, he couldn't fall asleep. For an uncertain amount of time that might have been ten minutes or an hour, Mike stared up at the ceiling. The moonlight filtering in through the window was just enough that he could make out the vague contours of the walls. He extracted an arm from underneath the ragged blankets and extended one finger, idly tracing the lines.

Was El awake right now? Was she thinking about him? Was she wishing she could have slept with him at her side? Maybe even—

The doorknob twisted. It was a slow movement, clearly done carefully and deliberately to avoid making noise, but the knob was an old, heavy brass thing and it creaked, a loud sound in the otherwise silence of night. The heavy hardwood door moved slowly inward.

Oh god Hopper knows what I'm thinking about, was Mike's first panicked and completely irrational thought. *He's coming to kick me out*. He opened his mouth to defend himself, struggling to sit up. The door clicked shut again. *Shit shit shit he locked me in here with him—*

Hopper's slight figure was moving very lightly and very quickly toward him, approaching from the foot of the bed. His full head of curls bounced as he moved. The first terrified word ("Wait—!") left Mike's mouth when Hopper slid, lithe as a weasel, underneath the blankets, sliding smoothly up past Mike's pajama-clad leg and pressing against his side before letting out a high, breathless giggle.

Wait, what the actual flying fuck?

Mike's heart rate settled and then picked back up immediately when

he realized: *duh*, of course it wasn't Hopper. That had just been the first conclusion his panicked brain had leapt to. But Hopper wouldn't sneak into his room past lights out. Hopper didn't giggle in the voice of a thirteen year-old girl. Hopper didn't have a mass of curly hair, and Hopper *definitely* didn't have the curves and soft springiness of the body that was now pressed up against Mike's, and which was very noticeably feminine. He felt his heart skip a beat or three.

"Hello, El," he said, grateful for the darkness that hid his blush.

"Hi, Mike." Mike could hear the proud smile in her voice.

"What are you doing?" He knew what she was doing, of course, but it was the first thing he could think to say.

"Wanted to see you," said El.

Mike felt a surge of affection. He worked one hand underneath her shoulder and drew her toward him. She responded eagerly, wriggling closer and nuzzling into the side of his neck. Mike's heart jumped again.

"I wanted to see you too," he said. "But Hopper will kill us if he finds out."

"He won't," El insisted. "We'll wake up before him and I'll go back to my room. We won't tell him."

Mike chewed the inside of his cheek, deliberating. On one hand, El's plan was staking everything on the hope Hopper was a late riser. And since the guy was Hawkins chief-of-police, Mike figured that didn't seem likely. It was almost certain Hopper would find out and he would have his ass handed to him.

On the other hand... there was an undeniable thrill that came with bending the rules like this. And, far more importantly, with spending the night with El. *In the same bed*. If he was going to risk punishment for anything, it may as well be for this, right?

El took his silence as a sign of doubt. "Please?" she begged, raising her head. It was too dark to make out her features, but Mike could feel her eyes fixed on his face. He knew they'd be huge and round

and dark and irresistible. "He likes you. He won't hurt you, even if he does find out. And even if he tries I won't let him."

Mike smiled. He craned his neck forward, trying to find her face. They bumped noses, hard, causing both teens to giggle before their lips found each other and the sound was stifled.

"I know," Mike said after they had parted. "I trust you."

She smiled and blinked — he could feel her lashes flutter against his cheek. Not for the first time, he realized how extraordinarily long they were. "So I can stay?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course."

El lowered her head back against him and smiled wide, nestling into the warm crook between his shoulder and neck. She sighed contentedly. Her breath was hot on the side of his throat. "Don't understand why I am not allowed to sleep with you," she murmured sleepily.

Mike swallowed. "Yeah..." he agreed. He was tempted to say "me neither" but lying to El was impossible. "They're worried we might do stuff, I guess," he said. "It's stupid."

"Stuff?" El's eyebrow wrinkled in confusion.

Mike winced. This was not something he was eager to explain. "Uh, yeah. Grown-up stuff, I guess. But we're too young for that, anyway. Don't worry about it now."

"Okay, Mike," El agreed. She settled back against him. One of her arms was thrown across his chest and one leg slung across his thighs, so that she was lying partially on top of him in a sort of half-hug. It made it a little hard for Mike to breathe, but he didn't want to move. As far as being crushed went, he figured this was far from the worst scenario. And besides, he didn't want to disturb El, whose respiration had slowed to a steady, even rhythm. She even *breathed* cutely, inhaling through her delicate nose and exhaling in a little puff from her mouth.

God, he loved her so much. He knew it wasn't normal, not for

thirteen year olds. And he knew if he so much as suggested it to any adult, he'd be laughed at. But hell, it was just *true*. The very concept of not loving Eleven seemed so alien, so incredibly far off and dismissible. Maybe he'd never had another girlfriend before, but who cared? Mike *knew* what he had with El was special. It wasn't puppy love, it wasn't a crush. He wouldn't *move on* or whatever the term was, not in a year or five or ten or eighty. He was going to stay at her side forever. He was going to help her live all the experiences she had been denied for the first twelve years of her life. He would show her his favorite places and hideouts, introduce her properly to movies and games and books, help her learn whatever she needed to learn. He would take her on dates, hug her and kiss her, bring her to school dances—

A bolt of realization hit Mike so hard and so suddenly he almost jumped out of bed; the only thing that held him down was the girl who was quickly asleep on his chest. She murmured sleepily and nuzzled into his shoulder.

But... school dances! *The Snowball!* When was it, again? A week, more or less? Jesus, and he still hadn't asked her, had he? He'd been too caught up in his angst and anxiety until the past couple days — and then blissful shock of confessing to El (and vice versa) had chased the matter from his mind entirely. But, man, he needed to get his act together. Weren't you supposed to ask, like, *way* in advance?

And what if she didn't want to go? A lot of people didn't like dances, right? Hell, Mike and his friends had solemnly vowed to never go to one a few years back. Maybe El didn't want to go. Which was perfectly understandable, really, and he couldn't blame her for it so—

Pussy. Just ask her. A voice in Mike's head cut off his own rambling.

But that's putting an obligation on her to say yes, a second, cautionary voice pointed out. Mike stifled a groan.

Why wouldn't she want to go?

Why would she?

She's my girlfriend! And besides, I already asked last year.

Yeah, and she didn't say yes.

Because she didn't know what a dance was! SHE'S LITERALLY LYING ON TOP OF YOU! Just ask her!

But what if—

Ask her—

No—

Yes—

Don't—

Do—

"Heyelyouwannagotothesnowballwithme?" The sentence exploded out of Mike's mouth in a slurred, unintelligible jumble of words. El started, eyes opening wide in surprise.

"Huh?" she replied, bewildered. Her voice was scratchy; Mike felt a surge of guilt as he realized he had woken her up.

"Uh... well..." He cleared his throat awkwardly, his face burning. "You remember last year in the cafeteria... I mentioned something about the Snowball?"

"The cheesy school dance," El remembered, gasping in excitement. "It would be weird to go with your sister. Yes."

"Yeah, that's it," Mike said, wincing at the memory. "The first one I asked you to already happened, but they do it every year, and, uh..." Inexplicably, his stomach was tying itself into knots. *She's your girlfriend. Get a damn grip on yourself. You're supposed to ask her to dances.* "The next one's happening soon so I was just wondering if—"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I want to go," El said.

Mike felt a smile spread across his face. "Oh. Okay, cool," he said, reeling slightly. That had been far easier than anticipated.

"Cool," El agreed, and he knew she was smiling too.

"Well, sorry for waking you," he said after a moment.

"S'ok," El murmured, snuggling close. Her head dropped back against his chest. A minute passed in silence when another question jumped into Mike's mind.

"El?" he said tentatively.

"Yes, Mike?"

"Why me?"

"Why you?" she repeated.

"Like, why do you like me? As a... as a boyfriend, instead of just a friend?" Mike said, chewing the inside of his cheek.

El turned her face toward the ceiling and bit her lip thoughtfully. A long moment passed before she spoke. "Hard to explain," she said, frowning.

Mike nodded. "It's okay," he assured her. "You don't have to if—"

"No," she cut him off. "I want to. But... hard." She was silent for another few seconds. Then, she said, "Mul... multiply reasons."

Mike had to grin. "Multiple," he corrected gently.

"Multiple reasons." She paused again. "You are very pretty."

Mike felt a flash of pride.

"Pretty hair. Pretty face. Pretty eyes," El went on. "But also pretty *here*." She put a small hand on Mike's chest, right over his heart. "You are nicer than anyone else. When you found me, Dustin and Lucas were scared, but you wanted to help. You gave me clothes and food and hid me from the bad men. Even though Will was gone, you still

wanted to help me. Lucas wanted me to leave, but you tried to make him listen. When I ran away, you tried to find me. And when I was gone..." El paused and swallowed to quell the tremble in her voice. "When I was gone you called every day. For three hundred and fifty-three days you tried to find me. I think... that is why I like you."

"Oh," was all Mike could say. He realized suddenly that that had probably been the longest speech he had ever heard come out of El. And all about him. He surreptitiously brought a hand up to wipe tears that had unexpectedly pricked in his eyes.

"What about you?" El said, rolling back onto her stomach.

"Why do I like you?" Mike said.

She nodded.

"Well..." he frowned up at the ceiling. "I guess I did since the beginning. At first, I wanted to help you. You were scared and cold and alone. But later, after you told us all the horrible stuff the bad men put you through, I realized how tough you were, I guess."

"Tough?" El repeated, surprised.

"Yeah. Like, you had been through all this stuff, but you didn't let it hold you back. You had suffered so much but you still just wanted to help us, you know?"

"But I tried to stop you from finding Will," she pointed out. Her voice was thick with guilt.

"Only because you didn't want us to get hurt," said Mike. "And then you found Will anyway. You tracked him in the Upside Down so Hopper and Joyce could go find him. You fought off the bad men when they came to get us. And then, goddamn, El, you *killed the demogorgon*. Even though you were exhausted and so tired you couldn't walk, you somehow mustered the energy to kill that thing, to protect us. You're the toughest person on the planet."

She blushed, a shy smile spreading across her face. "I... guess."

He kissed the top of her head, causing her to giggle.

"Now we should really get some sleep," Mike said. "Or we really will wake up late. And then I have no idea what we'll do when Hopper finds us."

El giggled again and nodded, wrapping an arm across his torso. Within a minute or two, her breathing had already settled back to that same adorable rhythm: in through the nose and *puff*, out through the mouth. In through the nose and *puff*, out through the mouth.

Goddamn did Michael Wheeler feel lucky.

So, a couple comments have been posted asking if this fic ends at the Snowball. The answer is yes, it does — so we're almost done! Probably around three or four chapters to go. But there's a good chance I'll continue writing ST stuff after this is over, so worry not!

As always, thanks a bunch for reading and reviews are appreciated. Peace!

11. Chapter 11

Hello, all! I know it's been awhile since I last updated and I apologize. Got some bad writer's block, then a poorly timed power outage, then more writer's block. Oh well. Enjoy chapter 11!

Mike awoke slowly and gradually the following morning. It was a lovely process. Subconsciously, his sleeping brain somehow remembered that it was a weekend, and as such, the waking up process was not sudden and frantic as was the tendency on school-day mornings. So instead of jerking awake with the dread that came with school already weighing on his chest, Mike was able to gradually, luxuriously slide into consciousness.

He first became aware of soft sunlight. It was trickling in through his bedroom window and pressing, ever so lightly, against his closed eyelids. It wasn't bright enough to be annoying, though, so he kept his eyes closed and took pleasure in allowing his mind to power on at its own gradual pace.

He next became aware of just how comfortable he was. He was so warm. His room was a perfect temperature, warm but not hot, and his blankets were comfortable but not crushingly heavy. And the girl sleeping next to him radiated a blissful heat from her small body—

Wait.

Mike's eyes flew open as memories of the previous night flooded back to him. The nighttime drive with the chief. Awkward but nice dinner. El, cute as hell in her pajamas. Going to bed in the guest room. El, sneaking in, suddenly all Little Miss Mischief. Inviting her to the Snowball. El, falling asleep with her head on his chest, vanilla-scented curls spilling across his torso. That had been nice — really nice. And the only downside was—

Shit.

Mike sat bolt upright. The movement was so sudden that El, jerked

from her sleep, let out a little cry of surprise. He rubbed his eyes and turned to squint at the old analog clock on the nightstand. 7:31.

"El," Mike whispered urgently, grabbing his girlfriend's shoulder.

She groaned and turned over, shoving her face into a pillow.

"El, you have to wake up," he begged. "The chief'll be awake any minute."

She mumbled something into the pillow.

Mike frowned. "Huh?"

She mumbled again. Muffled by the pillow, it sounded vaguely like "uhguhs".

"Uhguhs," Mike repeated blankly. Then his eyes lit up with recognition. "Eggos?"

A nod. The pillowcase bunched and un-bunched with her head movements.

"You can have all the Eggos you want," Mike promised. He was starting to panic. He glanced at the clock again. Was Hopper awake yet? Mike couldn't hear him in the living room. Then again, maybe he was reading a newspaper or something quiet. He turned back to El. "Please, El, go back to your room for a few minutes. Just until Hopper's awake so he can see us come out of our separate rooms. Please, El, or we'll both be busted."

"Bust...busted?" El murmured, rolling onto her back. She blinked up at him blearily. "Mike?"

"Yeah, uh... hi." El was clearly *not* a morning person. Under any other circumstance Mike would have found this fact adorable, but he was currently stressing quite a bit about getting gunned down by an angry policeman.

"Busted..." El repeated, her voice distant; she almost sounded like she was still dreaming. "Busted... *Shit!*" In an unknowing parody of Mike's own reaction, she sat bolt upright, eyes wide with alarm.

Who taught her that word? Mike thought. It was immediately followed up with, *duh, what other friends does she hang around?* But, jeez, it sounded wrong coming out of El's mouth, for some reason.

"Yeah, shit," he agreed anyway.

"Gotta go, gotta go," El muttered frantically, wriggling free of the blankets. She jumped from the bed, sleep-tangled curls bouncing. One of her pajama pant legs had rolled up to the knee in the night, but she didn't notice. She started to bolt to the door, then stopped in her tracks, turned, trotted back to Mike, and kissed him quickly on the lips.

"Liked that," she said, smiling shyly.

He had to smile. "Me too."

She turned and twisted the doorknob, taking great care to make it slow and silent. Then she tiptoed out into the living room, allowing the door to quietly fall shut behind her.

Mike rushed to the door and pressed his ear to it, straining his ears. Was Hopper there? Were they found out? It didn't seem like it; he couldn't hear thing.

Then: the unmistakeable sound of a door creaking open.

Shit.

El was in the middle of the living room — halfway to her own room — when the door opened.

She froze mid-tiptoe.

A yawning Hopper came slowly ambling from his bedroom. His hair was sticking up at crazy angles and his old ragged shirt had dark patches of sweat under the arms. Clearly, he had just woken up.

The burly chief's titanic yawn ended. He sleepily smacked his lips, blinked away post-sleep blariness, and stretched. Then his eyes alighted on El, staring at him with the wide-eyed expression of a deer

in the headlights.

"Morning," he grunted, voice gravelly from disuse.

"M-morning," El squeaked, trying and failing miserably to look nonchalant.

Hopper looked her up and down. "You're up early," he commented, frowning. "I don't think I've ever seen you get up without being tempted by Eggos first."

El shrugged, trying not to let her racing heart show in her expression.

"The Wheeler kid must be one hell of a guy, to get you out of bed before noon," Hopper said, a half-smile cracking across his heavy-browed face.

"R-right," El agreed eagerly, nodding several times. *Should have thought of that.*

Hop snorted, amused, and shook his head. "How long have you been up?" he asked, striding toward the kitchen. He opened the pantry, stooped low, and pulled out a bag of coffee beans. Beer with breakfast was a no-no ever since El moved in. It had taken awhile to adjust, initially, but after a few weeks, he had grown to love his wake-up ritual of putting on a pot of coffee. The process of grinding the beans and steaming the milk, the heavenly aroma; it was a far better way to start a day than alcohol, he had to admit.

"Um... ten minutes," El picked randomly.

Hop turned and frowned at her. "You've been standing in the middle of the room for ten minutes?" he said skeptically.

"Yes," El said. Then she mentally hit herself. *Stupid stupid stupid.*

Hop snorted and shook his head again. The grizzled policeman was many things, but dumb was not one of them. He knew exactly what it was to be a kid. He knew how a mind worked at that age, and he knew the stupid shit that it liked to pull. There was a sense of invincibility that came with the underdevelopment of the teenage brain, and with it, a complete lack of evaluation of risks. The

previous night, he had lain awake, chewing the ends of his overgrown mustache, staring at the chipped wood on the ceiling of his bedroom and thinking. Not worrying, necessarily — just thinking.

Even with Mike's hurried assurances, Hopper knew that teenagers would be teenagers. Mike and El were no exceptions; El's rebelliousness the previous night was proof of that. So, reluctantly, he had to accept that they'd try the same things any other teenage couple did. Not sex, necessarily, not yet — but everything that preceded it, surely: the late night calls, the sickeningly romantic love letters, poems, declarations, and gifts, the pushing for sleepovers... the sneaking into each other's rooms.

Hop had his suspicions. He wasn't certain, not by any means, but he had his suspicions. And he made his peace with it. He figured he had to, at this point; the alternative was living in a Cold War state with the girl who had become his daughter. And considering her unfortunate tendency to throw psychic tantrums when she didn't get what she wanted, that was *not* a position Hop wanted to be in.

So his new philosophy was this: El and the Wheeler kid could do whatever the fuck they dreamed of... as long as they didn't let him catch them.

He couldn't blame them for trying; given his own experiences as a teenager, it would be hypocritical as all hell. But he also was a father now, for the first time in years, and with that came responsibility and obligation to keep his daughter safe. And to bust her boyfriend if the need arose.

But this time... this time he'd let it slide. Partly because he had no proof, and partly because he thought they were kind of cute. Just a little. A tiny bit. Barely. Not at all, actually. Nope. Definitely not.

The door to the guest room creaked open and Mike himself stepped out, already dressed. His hair, sticking up in a thousand different directions, seemed almost a mirror image of El's, apart from the color. He yawned hugely — implausibly hugely.

Almost looks fake, Hopper thought dryly.

"Morning, everybody," Mike said — though 'said' was perhaps being generous. It came out more as a croak, as if Mike had spent the night inhaling smoke.

Or, maybe, as if he was *faking* a groggy voice.

Someone would have to teach the kid that trying too hard only it makes it all the more obvious.

"Morning," El parroted, smiling at Mike a little too widely. Hop glanced at her in time to see her follow up her greeting by mouthing, big and obvious: *I don't think he knows*.

Hop heaved a sigh and started to grind the beans.

He had to go into the station after breakfast. The kids announced that their friends were coming over, leaving Hopper feeling oddly scandalized. His cabin was barely his anymore. He maintained a little dignity by gruffly making them promise to be good. Then he was off.

It wasn't a particularly intensive day. It never really was, in Hawkins, not unless some otherworldly demon had shattered the wall of reality and forced its way into the human world to eat some kids and ruin some evenings. But you know. Apart from that.

Hop mostly passed the time by playing ping-pong and shooting the shit with Powell and Callahan. He tried to hide a cigarette from Flo, but the woman apparently had superpowers almost akin to El's; she tracked him down and yanked the little roll of paper and tobacco from his lips with a disapproving glare.

He got home a little after eight and holed up in his bedroom, turning on the radio to block out the noise of the six laughing teenagers in the living room. He eventually managed to doze off. By the time he woke up, the kids were gone — Mike included, this time. At least he knew better than to try his luck two nights in a row.

He groggily trekked to the kitchen to get dinner ready, only to find El waiting for him. She was sitting on a tall rickety stool by the counter, legs swinging a foot above the ground. It made her look bizarrely

young; more like a six year old than a thirteen year old.

"Hey, kid," he mumbled tiredly. "Hungry?"

She nodded, avoiding his gaze.

He frowned at her. "What's up?"

El opened her mouth, then closed it. Opened it again, closed it. Hopper was about to repeat his question when she finally spoke, the words tumbling out in a rush.

"Can I go to the Snowball with Mike?"

Hop blinked. "Can you— what?"

"The Snowball," El repeated. "School dance."

"Yeah, I know what it is," Hop told her, rubbing his jaw. He had gone every year in his own high school days. It felt like a lifetime ago. "No, you can't go."

Her brows contracted over her eyes and her jaw took the stubborn set he had become so familiar with. "But why?"

"You know why," Hopper said flatly. "It's a risk. Risks are stupid. And we're—"

"*Nobody would see me,*" El argued. Her fingers were tapping angry, erratic patterns on the countertop.

"We can't risk it," Hop said. "Listen, kid, I already granted you permission to go out with your friends. I just let you have a sleepover. Don't push it." His tone said that was the end of the conversation, but El would not back down so easily.

"I went outside," she reminded him. "Alone. To the school. Walked past people. Nobody recognized me."

"Yeah, except that mother and her kid who called my department on you because you made their swing set do flips," Hopper said, his voice rising.

El had the grace to blush. "I was stupid," she admitted. "Won't use my powers this time." She tried a different tactic: lifting the glare, she instead made her eyes big and round and pleading. "Promise," she added.

Hopper looked away pointedly. No way in hell was he going to let her tempt him with puppy eyes.

"Mike said there's a lot of people," she said. "He said..." She screwed up her brow, trying to remember his exact words. "He said I'll just be another kid, so nobody will think twice when they see me."

Hop rubbed his jaw again. He had to admit that was pretty sound logic. After all, what were the chances government agents would show up to a school kid's dance? "Well..."

"Please?"

Goddamn her stupid puppy eyes. How the hell did she make them so big? "I'll think about it," he conceded reluctantly.

Her face broke into a wide, crooked-toothed grin. "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me yet," he warned. "I'm not making any promises, you hear me? I said I'll think about it."

"Okay!" she said, but her grin stayed.

El knew when she had him beaten. She couldn't wait to tell Mike.

Let me know what you thought! Thanks for reading and happy new year to all! Hope everyone had a great time last night, and I wish you all a fantastic 2018. See you next chapter!

12. Chapter 12

The second after Hopper begrudgingly promised he'd give thought to the all-important matter of the Snowball, Eleven sprinted to the phone to relay the good news to Mike. She was dialing in his number, which she had, by now, memorized, before realizing that he probably wasn't home yet — he had just left, after all. She put the phone down and started to pace impatiently, throwing glances at the clock every few minutes.

Eventually, Hop called her to dinner. She wolfed down the food, barely tasting it in her excitement, and brought her plate to the kitchen and rinsed it, just like he had taught her, before racing to the phone and once again dialing Mike's number. This time she pressed the talk button and brought the phone to her ear, bouncing excitedly and choosing to ignore Hopper's dry comment about not being able to survive an hour without talking to her boyfriend.

"Hello?" It was Mike who answered, surprisingly; usually it was Karen, and if not her, Nancy. El wasted no time contemplating this, though.

"Mike!"

"Oh, El? Hi—"

"He said I could go!"

"He— what?" Mike sounded bewildered

"To the Snowball!"

"No, I didn't!" Hopper called from the kitchen.

"Oh, that's great!" Mike said, and El could hear the grin in his voice. She closed her eyes and pictured it, spreading across his face like a big crescent moon. She allowed her mind to enter the phone, felt it race through the wiring, merging with the electricity, and for a moment she could literally *see* Mike, standing in blackness with the phone pressed to his face. His grin was the exact one she had

pictured.

She smiled, feeling like her heart would burst. "I know," she replied earnestly.

"Hey, I don't know what you kids are planning, but I did *not* give you my permission yet, kid," Hop called, his voice indignant. "You make sure your little boyfriend knows that."

"Hopper says to tell you that he didn't give his permission yet," El said, shooting her foster father a beaming smile.

"Oh." Mike's tone fell. "So why did you say—"

"Don't worry. He's just being Hopper," El told him. The chief turned toward her, a glare creasing his face. She just smiled at him again, meeting his frowning blue eyes. He huffed and turned away, but El knew he would be smiling, too.

Tough guy, she mouthed at him. It was an expression she had picked up from Dustin and Lucas's bickering antics. She hadn't understood the insult at first, and what followed was a long, complicated discussion on the nuances of sarcasm. Max had been incredibly excited, and, predictably, had led that particular lesson.

"Holy shit, El, if you turn sassy I might have to take you away from Mike," she had said, laughing. "I want to see you putting people down left and right."

"As if we don't get enough of that from you," Lucas jibed.

"Please," Max had scoffed. "I'm not enough to penetrate that thick skull of yours. We need another man on the job."

"I'm not a man," El had pointed out.

"Figure of speech."

"Oh," Mike was saying, dragging El's attention back to the phone call. "Got it." She could hear him smiling again. "I'm really excited, El."

She had to blush. "Me too, Mike. Can you..." She hesitated.

"Can I...?"

"Can you tell me what... is there?"

"At the Snowball?" Mike paused, gathering his thoughts. "Well, I've never been, but... I'm guessing there'll be music. And most of the school goes, so it'll probably be packed with kids. There will probably be food and punch — not alcoholic, of course, since we're kids. And there'll be decorations, like fake snowflakes and Christmas trees and stuff. And everyone will dancing, of course." His face got oddly tight on the last sentence.

El closed her eyes, trying to picture what he was describing. It was kind of hard; she simply had no experience, no prior images to go on. The closest thing she had was a wedding scene from some soap or other, but she doubted it'd be much like that.

But whatever it was or wasn't, Mike made it sound magical. "I can't wait," she whispered fervently into the mouthpiece. Instinctively, her eyes flicked to Hopper as soon as the words left her mouth. He was sighing.

But not saying no. She hid another smile. However much he liked to pretend, she knew he would give sooner or later.

The next time Hopper sat her down for some big news, however, it had nothing to do with the Snowball. It was the following day, a Sunday, and El, as usual, had her friends over. Hopper had gone out just before their arrival, but, for a change, not to the police station.

"His name is Sam Owens," he had told her, when she had asked who he was meeting. "*Doctor* Sam Owens. He was a higher-up at the lab, before it went up in smoke."

She had bristled. "A bad man?"

He had shrugged, making a face. "It's... complicated, kid," he told her. "He oversaw some things that were pretty bad, yeah. He sure as hell ain't one of God's angels. But he's no demon, either. He had nothing to do with..." He gestured awkwardly at the number tattooed

on her arm. "With the really messed up stuff. That was Brenner."

"Papa."

"Yeah, Papa." Hopper spat the nickname like it was a foul taste he was trying to get out of his mouth. "Owens isn't like him. When Joyce, Bob, Mike and I were trapped in the lab with Will and those dog things, Owens stayed behind to help us escape. He got badly injured for it. Almost killed. We found him, remember?"

El's face lit up in recognition. "The big man? With the hurt leg?"

"Yeah, that was him." Hopper smiled at her. Why was he in such a good mood? "You remember what he promised to do?"

She frowned, trying to recall. "You told him... to help me?"

"Yeah. To help you lead a normal life. I told him that after the shit his coworkers put you through, it's the least he could do for you."

El nodded, feeling oddly touched by Hopper's matter-of-fact devotion to her. He might be gruff and grumpy and sort of scary sometimes, but he was *good*, just like Mike was.

"Anyway," he continued, "he asked me to meet him for lunch at some diner in town. Said he had something to give me."

"A present?" For some reason, the idea of the burly, curly-haired scientist giving Hopper a present made El giggle. Hop smiled, watching her, and ruffled her hair again.

"I guess so. Tell you what, if I don't like it, I'll bring it home for you, okay?" he said.

"Okay!" El agreed happily, and ate what was left of her Eggo — which was around half of it — in one massive bite. Her eyes widened in alarm, and she started to choke and cough until Hopper reached across the table and pounded her on the back. A big chunk of half-chewed waffle flew out of her throat and splatted onto her plate. El gasped, eyes streaming.

"Hey, what'd we talk about?" said Hopper, shaking his head. He sat

back into his chair, his face tight as he (very conspicuously) worked to restrain a laugh.

"One bite at a time," El mumbled, blushing. "That *was* one bite. Too big."

"Okay, we'll change it," Hop replied. "One *normal-sized* bite at one time."

"How do I know if it's not normal-sized?" El challenged, taking another, smaller, bite of Eggo (which effectively rendered her point moot).

Hop gave her a wry half-smile. It was his equivalent of a laugh and a grin. "It's normal if you don't have to open your mouth to the size of Indiana to put your food in it," he told her. "You looked like a frog."

This made El laugh so hard she started to choke again. For the second time, Hopper's hand on her back rescued her.

"Christ, kid, maybe I shouldn't go to this lunch," he said after she had recovered. "At this rate I think you'll choke yourself to death while I'm gone."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He went to meet Owens anyway, and from there to the station. El's friends had to get the last of their weekend homework done, so they departed earlier than usual; by the time Hopper came home, they had already left, promising to come over tomorrow. The chief came through the door to be greeted, for once, by a quiet house. The only sound was the TV, which was playing some soap or other. Hop wondered idly when, or even *if*, El would grow out of those.

"Kid," he called. She acknowledged him with a nod, too absorbed in her movie to look away from the screen. "Kid, I want you to see something."

"Mm," she replied, not really hearing him. There was a gripping romance unfolding onscreen which demanded her full attention.

"Kid?" Hop waved his hands hopefully. "El," he called a little louder.

She huffed a sigh, paused the TV with the barest flick of her head, and turned to look at him with a miffed expression. She hated having her movie time interrupted. But she forgot to be annoyed when she saw he was holding something in his hand.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing.

"See for yourself." He held it out to her. It was an envelope: plain white paper, normal sized, not like one of those big fancy yellow ones Hopper sometimes brought home from the police station. She looked up at him, confused.

"Open it," he told her.

She lifted the flap and grabbed the slip of paper inside. It was light blue, with a darker border, and covered in print. She frowned at it, lips moving silently as she sounded out the typed words.

"State of Indiana," she read, slowly and haltingly. "Kur... kurtiff..."

"Certificate," Hopper corrected gently.

"Certificate," El repeated, "of birth. This kurtif... *certifies* that acc... accor... according to the records of the State of Indiana..." She trailed off, frowning. There were lines that someone had written on in pen. She skimmed over them, mumbling the words absently. "Name, Jane Hopper... Was born in Hawkins... Child of Teresa Ives..."

She froze. Her eyes flicked back to the first line. "J-Jane Hopper..."

"Congratulations, kid," Hopper said, and when she looked up at him he was smiling, a real, full, eye-crinkling smile. "You're my daughter."

She blinked at him mutely. Once. Twice. Three times. On the third, when she opened her eyes, her vision was blurry. She frowned, not sure what was happening until she felt hot tears coursing down her cheeks.

"N-No, I'm not..." She wiped them away furiously. "I— I'm not sad, why—" And suddenly she couldn't continue because her entire body was wracked with sobs. They came on like a tidal wave, heaving her tiny frame until she was gasping great gulps of air between wails. *I'm*

not sad, she kept trying to tell Hopper, afraid he'd get the wrong idea, but she couldn't get the words out. But then his arms, his big, warm, comforting arms, were around her, and she knew he understood. She hugged him back, reaching blindly around his neck and latching on like her life depended on it. She was dimly aware that her feet weren't on the ground; he was holding her, swaying her gently, while she sobbed into the crook of his neck.

You're my daughter. You're my daughter. You're my daughter. His words played in her head, over and over and over like a mantra.

She had a father.

Not a Papa. Not anymore. He was dead, gone, out of El's life, no matter what Kali said. He was gone and now El had someone *real*, someone who loved her, someone who would care for her and teach her and love her and do everything Papa didn't do.

She had a father.

She was a daughter.

She was crying.

"Hey, kid, you want to know what else?" Hopper said, his voice gentle. It rumbled through his barrel like chest. She could feel the vibrations. "I asked Owens about your... your Snowball."

El's heart skipped a beat. She removed one arm from around his neck and shakily wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Did he..."

"He said there'd be no harm in you going out for one night," Hop said. "You'll have to lay low for awhile, but— *oof!*"

The last sound was forced out of him in a surprised grunt as El hugged him even tighter, squeezing with all the force she could muster from her diminutive frame. "Thank you thank you thank you!" she squealed into his shoulder.

He chuckled. "Yeah, uh... don't mention it, kid."

"Not kid," she corrected, poking his broad back. "*Jane.*"

"Jane." He smiled. Her cheek was pressed to her new father's, and his stubble was scratchy against her face. She didn't mind. "Jane Hopper," he mused. "Not a bad name."

"Good," she agreed. "A good name."

"Can't argue," he replied. "Maybe not as good as Jim Hopper, though."

She wriggled out of his arms and fell back to the floor, staggering a little before straightening and assuming an indignant expression. "Better," she said, glaring at him in mock offense. "Much prettier."

"Jim Hopper is very pretty," he argued. "Maybe I should get a dress and go to this dance of yours. Bet all the boys would ask me to dance." El collapsed in giggles at the image.

"Silly," she chided when she finally recovered. She wiped a string of drool off her chin in a decidedly unfeminine gesture. "Silly Hopper."

"Hey, you don't get to call me that anymore," he reminded her.

Her brows contacted in confusion. "No?" Then, a second later: "Oh!" Her eyes lit up in realization. "Are you... Papa, now?"

Hopper frowned, rubbing his chin. "Not sure I like the sound of that," he admitted. "Reminds me too much of that son of a bitch, Brenner."

El nodded fervently. She was glad they were in agreement on that specific matter. "Then..." She pushed her mind back to the scores of movies she had seen in the past year. What did people call their fathers? What about... "Daddy?"

He made a face. "Not too keen on that either," he said. "Makes me feel like a pedophile."

"What is pe—"

"Never mind that," he said quickly. "What about just Dad?"

"Dad," she repeated, eyes thoughtful as she tasted the word. "Dad. I like it."

"Me, too, kid.

"Jane."

"Jane."

This chapter turned out to be a little different from the rest of the fic, in that there wasn't much Mileven. That said, I think this was a hugely important part of the epilogue of ST2, and I didn't want to skip over it. El getting an official identity, and a legally recognized father in Hopper, is such a step forward in her life. It's like a promise that she can start to live life as a normal kid, with friends and school and a family, and of course we all know how important promises are.

Also, before anyone gets worried: don't worry, I'm not about to start referring to Eleven as Jane all the time. I definitely very much prefer El, and I think, canonically, the Party would probably never grow out of that nickname for her. They *gave* it to her, after all. That said, I think getting an actual name instead of, you know, a number, would be a pretty huge thing for her, so I wanted to address that here. But yeah, don't worry. Mike and the other kids will still be calling her El. :)

Cheers! Let me know what you thought, and thanks for reading as always.